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AGATHA'S HUSBAND.

A Novel.



AGATHA'S HUSBAND

A NOVEL.

BY THE AUTHOR OF
"OLIVE," "THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY," &c.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

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AGATHA'S HUSBAND.

CHAPTER. I.

“MRS. HARPER—Missus—there’s a carriage at the door.”

“Say I am not at home.”

She had given the same sullen answer to every visitor for four weeks, shutting herself up in stern seclusion, determined that, whatever cruel comments they made, the neighbourhood should have no power of ocularly spying into the mystery of “that poor Mrs. Locke Harper who did not live happy with her husband.” For so she felt sure had been

the result of that fatal betrayal to her brother-in-law. Since, as Harrie had once said, "Duke never could keep a secret in his life!" But even his own wife could not thoroughly fathom the good heart of Marmaduke Dugdale.

"Not at home?" repeated Dorcas, who had been very faithful to her young mistress. "Not when it's Miss Valery, who has been so ill? Oh, Missus, do'ee see Miss Valery."

Mrs. Harper hesitated, and during that time her visitor entered uninvited.

"So, Agatha, as you did not come to see me, I have come at last to see you."

"I am sorry——"

"What, to see me?" said Anne, smiling. But the voice was weak, and the smile had a sickly beauty. Agatha was struck by a change, slight yet perceptible, which had come over Miss Valery.

"I hear you have been ill—will you take the arm-chair? Are you better to-day?"

"Oh yes," returned Anne, briefly; she was never much in the habit of talking about herself. "But you, my dear, how have you been this long time? Come and let me look at you."

"It is not worth while. Never mind me. Talk of something else?"

"Of your husband, then. When did you hear from him?"

"Last week."

"And is he quite well? Will you give a message to him from me when you write again?"

"I never write."

Miss Valery looked surprised, pained. Evidently to her sick-room had reached the vaguest possible hints of what had happened. Or else Anne must have refused to hear or credit what she was persuaded was an impossible falsehood. In a pure heart scandal dies, unrepeatd, unbeliev'd.

To Mrs. Harper's brief, sharp sentence

there was no reply ; her guest turned to other topics.

“ Harriet Dugdale comes home to-morrow. It is not often she takes it into her head to pay a three weeks' visit from home. You must have missed her a good deal.”

“ No, I did not. I have never been outside the garden.”

“ Was that quite right, dear ? And your sisters-in-law complain bitterly that you will not go to Kingcombe Holm.”

“ They should have taken more trouble in coming to ask me.”

“ Nay, in this world we should not judge too harshly. We cannot see into any one's heart. There may have been reasons. I know the Squire has not been quite well ; and Mary has spent her whole time in watching him, and in coming to Thornhurst to nurse me.”

“ Have you been so very ill, then ? I wish—I wish——”

“That you also had come to see me? Well, you will come now. Not to-day; for I am going to use this lovely autumn-morning in taking a brief journey.”

“Whither?”

“To Weymouth, opposite the Isle of Portland.”

After this answer, given in rather a low voice, both were silent. Agatha was thinking of the night when her husband rode to Weymouth. Anne was thinking—of what? No one could pierce through the veil of Anne Valery's thoughts.

At length she put them aside, and turned to watch the young wife, who had fallen into a sullen, absent mood.

“Does your house please you, Agatha? It is very pretty, I think.”

“Yes, very. I do not complain. Would you like to look over it? Or shall I give you some cake and wine? That is the fashion, I

believe, when a visitor first comes to see a bride in her new home."

The bitterness, the sarcasm, were pitiful to see on such young lips. Anne Valery watched her, sadly, yet not hopelessly. There was in the calm of that pale face a clearness of vision which pierced through many human darknesses to the light behind.

She only said, "Thank you, I will take some wine; I like to keep up good old ways,"—and waited while Mrs. Harper, with a quick excited manner, and a countenance that changed momentarily, did the first honours of her household. So sad it was to see her doing it all alone! More widow-like than bride-like.

As she came up with the wine-glass, Miss Valery caught her hand, holding it firmly, in defiance of Agatha's slight effort to get free.

"Wait a minute for my good wishes to the

bride. May God bless you ! Not with fortune, which is oftentimes only a curse——”

“That is true,” muttered Agatha, bitterly.

“Not with perfect freedom from care, for that is impossible, or, if possible, would not be good for you. Every one of us must bear our own burden ; and we can bear it, if we love one another.”

Agatha's lips were set together — their sneer changing into smothered agony.

“If,” continued Anne, firmly—“If we love any one with sincerity and faithfulness, we are sure to reap our reward some time. If any love us, and we believe it and trust them, they are sure to come out clear from all clouds, our own beloved, true to the end. Therefore, Agatha, above all blessings, may God bless you with *love* ! May you be happy in your husband, and make him happy ! May you live to see your home merry and full—not silent !—may you die among your children and your own people—not alone !”

The sudden solemnity of this blessing, enhanced by the feebleness of the voice that uttered it, awoke strange emotions in Agatha. She threw herself on her knees by the arm-chair, where Anne lay back—now faint and pale.

“Oh, if you had been near me—if I had known you always, and you had brought me up, and made a good woman of me.”

“Perhaps I ought,” murmured Anne, thoughtfully. “But, just then, it would have been so hard—so hard!”

“What are you saying? Say it again. All your words are good words. Tell me.”

“Nothing, dear. Except” —here Miss Valery raised herself with a sudden effort, mental and bodily—“Agatha, will you go with me to Weymouth?”

“If you like. Anywhere to be with you. I am sick of myself.”

“We all are at times, especially when we are young, and do not quite understand our-

selves or others. The feeling passes away. But as to Weymouth—do you still dislike to go near the sea ?”

“ Yes—no ! I will try to bear it ; I think I could, by your side. And you shall not go alone on any account.”

“ Thank you,” said Anne, taking her hand. So they went.

An innocent branch railway darted past Kingcombe, in the vain hope of waking that somnolent town. It was a pleasant whirl across the usual breezy flats of moorland, by some meadows where a network of serpentine streams flashed in the sun. Agatha felt more like her own self ; with her, the spirit of Nature was always an exorciser of internal demons ; and Anne's conversation aided the beneficent work.

At Dorchester they took a carriage, and drove across the country to Weymouth.

“ Are you not getting weary ? you looked so but lately,” said Agatha to Miss Valery.

“Not at all, I feel strong now.” Her eyes and cheeks were indeed very bright; she leaned forward and gazed eagerly around.

“This Weymouth seems familiar to you, Miss Valery?”

“Yes; we used to come here every summer—Mr. and Mrs. Harper and the children and I, until she died. She was as good as a mother, or elder sister——” here Anne hesitated, but repeated the words—“like an elder sister—to me. We were all very happy in those times. It is a great blessing, Agatha, to have had a happy childhood. Where did you spend yours?”

Agatha looked uneasy. “Chiefly in London—I told you.”

“But before then, when you were a very little girl?”

“I do not know. Don’t let us talk about that.”

“Not if you do not wish it.” Anne’s eyes, which had watched her closely, turned

away, and after a few minutes were riveted on a line of blue sea sweeping round a distant headland, and curving off to the horizon. As she looked she became very pale, and shivered. Agatha hardly noticed her, being so busy examining the new regions into which they now entered—the ordinary High-street of an ordinary country town. The sea view had vanished.

Suddenly the carriage turned a corner, and they burst upon the shore of Weymouth Bay. A great, blue, glittering bay, with two white headlands shutting it in; the tide running high, the waves dashing themselves furiously against the sea-wall of the esplanade, breaking into showers of spray, and curling back into the foaming whirl below.

Agatha started, and put her hands before her eyes. “I know that sight—I remember that sound. Oh! where is this place? why did you bring me here?”

At this cry Miss Valery, roused from her momentary fit of abstraction, took hold of Agatha's hand. The girl was trembling violently.

"Be quiet, dear. I did not expect this, or you should not have come here. This is Weymouth. Now do you remember?"

"How should I? Was I ever here before?" She peered from under her hand at the sparkling sea. "No, it is not like *that* sea; it is too bright. Yet I hear the same roll. Oh, let us get away."

"Hush, my child, hush," said Anne's soothing voice. "Try and bear it. We have all many things to bear. We must drive along this shore, and then we will get out at an inn I know, and rest."

Her manner, her expression, as she fixed her eyes full upon her, struck Agatha with an indescribable feeling. She looked eagerly at Miss Valery, trying to read in that worn face some likeness to the one which had im-

pressed her childish memory with almost angelic beauty.

“Tell me—you say you have been often here—did you ever one stormy day follow a ship that was outward bound? You were in a little boat, and the ship was standing out, round that point—and——”

She stopped, for Anne's face was livid to the very lips. Agatha forgot her own question and its purport.

“Stop the carriage. Let me hold you. Dear—dear Miss Valery! you are worn out—you are fainting.”

“No—I never faint—I am only tired. Don't speak to me for a minute or two, and I shall be well.”

With a long sigh she forcibly brought life back to her cheeks—a feeble life at best. Agatha, watching her, was smitten by a dread which now entered her mind for the first time, driving thence all personal feelings, and making her gaze with sorrowful

anxiety on the friend beside her who had been all day so cheerful and kind. And she thought with a remorse amounting to positive horror, that she herself during that day had more than once spoken sharply even to Anne Valery.

A great awe came upon her, reflecting how often we unconsciously walk hand-in-hand, and talk of our own petty earthly trials, with those whose souls'-wings are already growing, already stirring with the air that comes to bear them to the unseen land.

It was a relief indescribable, when leisurely strolling along the pavement, she saw among many strange faces one that seemed familiar. The hands knotted loosely at his back, the light hair straggling out from under the hat, that was pushed far up from the forehead—no, she could not be mistaken. She uttered a cry of pleasure.

“Look, look! there he is; I am certain it is he.”

Anne started violently.

"Mr. Dugdale, Mr. Dugdale!" Agatha called out.

He came up to the carriage with the most lengthened "E—h !" that she had ever heard him utter. "Whatever brought you two here ? This bleak day too. Very wrong of Anne !"

"But she would come. She said she wanted a breath of sea-air, and the sight of the place ; and I think, besides, she has business."

"No," interrupted Anne, "no business, except bringing Agatha to see Weymouth. Now shall we rest, and have some tea at the inn ? You'll come with us, Mr. Dugdale ?"

"Yes, I want to speak to you, Anne. I've got news about——that little affair you know of. That was why I came to Weymouth to-day. Eh, now—just look there !"

With a countenance brimful of pleasure

he came to Miss Valery's side, and pointed to a steamer that lay in the offing.

"It's the *Anna Mary*. She made the passage from New York in no time. I've been aboard her already. I fancied I might find him there. Now, what do you think, Anne?"

"Is he come?" said Anne, in a steady voice. She had quite recovered herself now.

"No—not this time. But he will sail, for certain, by the next New York packet to Havre."

"Thank God!" It was a very low answer—just a sigh, and nothing more.

"And we have satisfactorily ended all that business which you first put into my head," continued Duke, rubbing his hands with great glee. "It was a risk certainly, but then it was for him. My children will never be a bit the poorer."

"No," murmured Anne Valery, with an inward smile.

"And think what an election we shall

have! With him to make speeches for Trenchard, and argue in his wonderful way about Free-trade, and tell the farmers all about Canadian wheat! Glorious!"

"What *are* you both talking about?" cried Agatha, who had been considerably puzzled. "Do let me hear, if it is not a secret."

"No secret," said Anne, turning round, speaking clearly and composedly, and not at all like a sick person. "Mr. Brian Harper is coming home."

Agatha clapped her hands for very joy.

When they dismounted from the carriage, and had ordered tea at the inn, Anne still seemed quite strong. She said it was the sea-breeze that brought life to her, and stood at the open window gazing over the bay. Agatha thought she had never seen Miss Valery's face so near looking beautiful as now; it was the faint reflex of girlhood's brightness, like the zodiacal light which the

sun casts on the sky long after he has gone down.

After tea—at which meal Mr. Dugdale did not appear, a fact that nobody wondered at, since he was left to wander about Weymouth at his own sweet will, without Harrie to catch him and remind him that there was such a thing as time, likewise such sublunary necessities as eating and drinking—after tea Miss Valery and Mrs. Harper sat at the window together.

It was only an inn-window, the panes scribbled over with many names, and it lighted an ordinary inn-parlour; looking on the esplanade. Yet it was a pleasant seat; quiet, too, for the town was almost deserted as winter-time came on. The bay, smoothed by the ebbing tide, lay like crystal under a sky where sunset and moonlight mixed. Agatha ventured to look at the sea now. She beheld with a curious interest a sight till now so unfamiliar, taking a childish pleasure in

watching the great white arm of moon-rays stretch further and further across the water, changing the ripples into molten silver, and making ethereal and ghostlike every little boat that glided through them.

By-and-by came a group of wandering musicians, playing very respectably, as German street-musicians always do. They converted the dark esplanade and the shabby inn-parlour into a fairy picture of visible and audible romance.

"It is quite like a scene in a play," said Agatha, laughing, and trying to make Miss Valery laugh. She could not see her clearly in the moonlight, but she did not like her sitting so quiet and silent.

"Yes, very like a play, with this for a serenade: '*Herz, mein Herz.*' What a sweet old tune it is!"

"I used to sing it once." And Agatha began following the instruments with her

voice. "No, I can't sing. I could sooner cry."

"Why?" Are you sorrowful?"

"No—happy. Yet all feels strange, very strange." She crept to Miss Valery, wrapped her arms round her waist, and laid her head timidly on her shoulder. Anne drew her nearer, with a more caressing manner than she had ever used to any one. Agatha Harper seemed that night of all nights to lie very near her heart.

"*Herz, mein Herz,*" died faintly away down the esplanade; there was nothing but the glitter of the bay, and the moon climbing higher and higher above the Isle of Portland.

Anne spoke at last, amidst the half-playful, half-tender caresses that were so dear to Agatha, who had never known what it was to lie calmly and safely in a mother's arms. Lying thus seemed most like it.

“Do you think I care for you, Agatha, my child?”

“I cannot tell. Perhaps not, for I am not good enough to deserve it.”

“Do you know what first made me care for you?”

“No—unless it was for the sake of my husband.”

Anne gave no reply, and her husband's name plunged Agatha into such a maze of painful thought, that she was for a long time altogether silent.

“Shall I tell you a story, Agatha?”

“Anything—anything, to keep me from thinking.”

“If I do, it is one you must not tell again, unless to Nathanael, for I would put no secrets between husband and wife.”

“Ah, that is right—that is kind. Would that *he* had thought the same!” cried Agatha, half inaudibly.

“What did you say, dear?”

“Nothing! Nothing of any consequence. Don't mind me. Go on.”

“It is a history which I think it right and best to tell you. You will both need to keep it sacred for a little while—not for very long.”

As she spoke, a shudder passed through Anne's frame. Was it the involuntary shudder of mortality in sight of immortality?

Shortly afterwards she began to talk in her usual sweet tone—perhaps a shade more serious.

“There were once two *friends*—three, I should say, but the third far less intimate than the other two. Something happened—it is now too long ago to signify what—which made the elder of the first two angry with his dearest friend and the other. He went away suddenly, writing word to his friend—his own—that he should sail next day, leaving England for ever.”

“That was wrong,” cried Agatha. “Peo-

ple ought never to be passionate and unjust in friendship. It was very wrong."

"Hush! you do not know all the circumstances; you cannot judge," Anne answered hastily. "His friend, who greatly lo—— honoured him, and knew what pain his loss would bring to many, wished to prevent his going. She——"

"It was a woman, then?"

"Yes."

"And were they *only* friends?"

"They were friends," repeated Miss Valery, in a tone which, doubtful as the answer was, made Agatha feel she had no right to inquire further.

"She never knew how much he cared for her until that last letter he wrote, after he had gone away. She followed him—which she had a right to do—to the place he mentioned, a seaport from which he was to sail. When she reached it, the vessel had already heaved anchor and was standing out to sea.

She saw it—the very ship he was on board—in the middle of the bay.”

“The bay ! Was it then——”

“Hush, dear, just for a little,—I cannot speak long. It was a stormy day, and few boats would go out. However, there was on the beach a woman who was very eager likewise to catch the vessel. Together they managed to get a boat, and embarked—this lady I speak of—the woman and a little girl.”

Agatha listened with painful avidity.

“It was not the woman’s own child, or she could not have been so careless of it. It was tossed in to the bottom of the boat, and lay there crying. The lady felt sorry for it, and took it in her arms. They had gone but a little way from the shore when it was playing about her, quite happy again. While playing—she looking at the ship, and not watching the little thing as she ought to have done—the child fell overboard.”

A loud sob burst from Agatha.

“Hush, still hush, my darling! The child was saved. The ship sailed away, but the child—you *know* that she was saved. I am thankful to God it was so!”

Anne wrapped her arms tightly round the sobbing girl, and after a few moments she also wept.

“I remember it all now,” cried Agatha, as soon as she found words—“the shore, the headlands, the bay. I was that little child, and it was you who saved me!”

Anne made no answer but by pressing her closer.

“I felt it the first moment I ever saw you. I never forgot you—never! But how did you know me?”

“Was I likely ever to lose sight of that little child? And also, years before, I had once or twice met your father—though this would have been nothing. But from that day

I felt that you belonged to me. And now, since you are become a Harper, you do."

Agatha embraced her, and then suddenly looked mournful.—"But yourself? Tell me, did you ever again meet your—your friend?"

No answer. A slight movement of the lips sufficed to explain the whole.

"And it was all through me," cried Agatha, to whom that soft smile was agony. "And what have I done in requital? I have lived a useless, erring life; I have suffered—oh, how I have suffered! Far better I had been left lying at the bottom of that quiet bay. Why did God let you save me?"

"That you might grow up a good and noble woman, fulfilling worthily the life He spared, and giving it back into His hands, in His time, as a true and faithful servant. Dare not to murmur at His will—dare not to ask why He saved you, Agatha Harper."

Saying this, as sternly as Anne Valery could

she tried to put Agatha from her breast, but the girl held her too fast.

“Oh, do not cast me away. I have nobody in the world but you. Forgive me! Guide my life which I owe you, and make it worth your saving. Love me—teach my husband to love me. If you knew how miserable I am, and may be always.”

“No one is miserable always,” returned Anne, faintly, as she leaned back, her hands dropping down cold and listless. “We grow content in time. We shall all be—very happy—some day.”

She spoke with hesitation and difficulty. The next minute, in spite of her declaration that she never fainted, Miss Valery had become insensible.

CHAPTER II.

“WHAT, up and dressed already, without sending for me? Did you not promise last night that I should do everything for you just as if I were your child? How very naughty you are, Miss Valery.”

Agatha spoke rather crossly ; it was a relief to speak so. Anne turned round—she was sitting at the window of the inn bed-chamber looking on Weymouth Bay.

“Am I naughty? And you have assumed the right to scold me? That is quite a pleasure. I have had no one to scold me for a great many years.”

There was a certain pathos running through her cheerfulness which made Agatha's heart burst. She had lain awake half the night thinking of Anne Valery, and had guessed, or put together many things, which made her come with uncontrollable emotion into the presence of her whose fate had been so knotted up with her own. For that this circumstance had in some way or other brought about Anne's fate—the one fate of a woman's life—Agatha could not doubt. Neither could she doubt who was this “friend.” But she said nothing—she felt she had no right.

“Don't look at the sea, please. Look at me. Tell me how you feel this morning.”

“Well—quite well. We will go home to-day. What did you tell Mr. Dugdale last night?”

“Only what you desired me—that, being wearied, you felt inclined to stay the night at Weymouth.”

“That was right.—Look, Agatha, how

beautiful the sea is. I must teach you not to be afraid of it any more. Next year——”

She paused, hesitated, put her hand stealthily to her chest, as she often did, and ceased to speak ; but Agatha eagerly continued the sentence :

“ Next year we will come and stay here, you and I ; or perhaps, as a very great favour, we'll admit one or two more. Next year, when you are quite strong, remember. We will be very happy, next year.”

She repeated the words strongly, resolutely, dinning them into Miss Valery's ear, but she only won for answer that silent smile which went to her heart like an arrow. She rushed for safety to the common-places of life, to the quick, hasty speeches which relieved her. She began to be very cross about some delay in breakfast.

“ Never mind me, dear,” said Anne's quieting tones. “ I am quite well, and want nothing. Only let us sit still, and look at

the sea." And she drew her from her eager bustling about the inn parlour to the place where they had both sat the previous night. Agatha balanced herself on the arm of the chair, determined she would not be serious for an instant, and would not let Anne talk. Yet both resolutions were broken ere long. Perhaps it was the bright stillness of the sea view, sliding away round the headland into infinity, which impressed her in spite of herself. Still she struggled against her feelings.

"I will not have you so grave, Miss Valery. Mind, I will not."

"Am I grave? Nay, only quiet; and so happy! Do you know what it is to be quite content with everything in one's life—past, present, and to come, knowing that all is overruled for good, forgiving everybody and loving everybody?"

Agatha linked her arms tighter round Miss Valery's neck.

“Don’t talk in that way, or look in that way—don’t. Be wicked! Speak cross! I will not have you an angel. I will not feel your wings growing. I’ll tear them out. There.”

She laughed—laughed with brimming eyes—until she sobbed again. Her feelings had been on the stretch for hours, and now gave way. Anne bent down from her serenity to notice and soothe the wayward child.

“Poor little thing, she wants taking care of as much as anybody. When will her husband come home?”

“Never—never!” cried Agatha, hardly knowing what she said. “I shall lose him—you—all.”

Miss Valery smiled—the composed smile of one who ascending a mountain sees the lowland mazes around laid out distinct and clear, and looks over them to their ending.

“Yes, my child, he will come back. Absence breaks slender ties, but it binds

strong ones. Have faith in him. People like him if they once love, love always. He will come back."

There was a great light in Miss Valery's countenance, which irresistibly attracted Agatha. She dried her eyes, forgot her own personal cares, and listened to the comforter.

"Think how much we love those that are away. Once perhaps we used to vex and slight them and be cross with them, but now we carry them in our hearts always. We forget everything bitter, and remember only the sweet; how good they were, and how dearly we loved them. Our thoughts and prayers follow them continually, flying over and about them like wandering angels, that must be laden with good. And all this loving—all this waiting—all this praying, year after year—I mean day after day"—she suddenly turned to Agatha. "Be content, my child. He will come back."

Agatha made no reply. She was not thinking of herself just then. She was thinking of the life, compared to which her own nineteen common-place years sank into nothingness ; of the love beside which that feeling she had so called, looked mean and poor ; of the patient endurance—what was her patience ? And yet she had fancied that never was woman so tried as Agatha Harper !

With a resolve as sudden as brave, and in her present state of mind to be brave at all it must needs be sudden, Agatha determined to put herself and her troubles altogether aside, and think only of those whom she loved.

“ Come,” she said, and rose up strong in the courage of self-denial. “ We will indulge in no more dreariness ; it is not good for you, and I won’t allow it, my patient. You shall be patient, in every sense, for a little while longer, and then we’ll all be very happy—*all*, I say, next year.”

With this declaration she made ready to carry her friend off to Kingcombe—to her own little house—where she was bent on detaining Anne prisoner. Miss Valery declared herself quite willing to be thus bound for a day or two, until she was strong enough to go to Kingcombe Holm.

“But I’ll not let you go—I’ll be jealous. Why must you be wandering off to that dreary place?”

“It is not dreary to me ; I always loved Kingcombe Holm ; and I must pay it one last visit before—before winter.”

“But there is plenty of time,” returned Agatha, hastily. “Why go just now?”

“Because——” Miss Valery spoke, after a moment’s pause, very steadfastly. “Because I have reasons for so doing. My old friend, Mr. Harper, has a few strong prejudices, some of them to the hurt of his brother, and I wish to talk to him myself before Mr. Brian Harper comes home.”

While Miss Valery said this name Agatha had carefully bent her eyes seaward. In answering, her colour rose—her manner was more troubled and hesitating by far than that of her companion.

“Go, then. I will not hinder you. Nobody can feel more interest than I do in Uncle Brian. When do you think he will be here?”

“In three weeks, most likely.”

Anne made no other remark, nor did Agatha. In a short time they were driving homeward along the margin of the bay. That solemn, well-remembered bay, the sight of which even now made Agatha feel as if she were dreaming over again the one awful event of her childhood. And Anne—what felt she? No wonder that she did not talk.

They came to a spot where the formal esplanade merged into a lonely sea-side walk, leading towards the widening mouth of the bay, and commanding the farthest view of the

Channel as it curved down westward into the horizon. Agatha turned pale.

“ I remember it—that line of coast with the grey clouds over it. I lay on these sands, and afterwards when you fell, I sat and cried over you. This was the place, and it was over that point that the ship disappeared.”

Anne was speechless.

Agatha threw herself upon her breast—they understood one another. The next minute the carriage turned. Miss Valery breathed a quick sigh, and bent hurriedly forward ; but the glitter of the ocean had vanished—she had seen the last of Weymouth Bay.

It was a weary journey, for Anne seemed very feeble. Her young nurse was thankful when the flashing network of streams told how near they were whirling towards Kingcombe. As the train stopped, Mrs. Dugdale was visible on the platform ; Duke also, not at the station—that being a degree of

punctuality quite impossible—but a little way down the road.

“Well, Miss Anne Valery and Mrs. Locke Harper! To be gallivanting about in this way! I declare it’s quite disgraceful. What have you to say for yourselves? Here have I been running up to every train to meet you, and tell you——”

“What?” Agatha’s cheek flushed with expectation. Anne grew very white.

“Now, Mrs. Harper, you need not be so hasty—’tisn’t your husband. A great blessing if it were. All the town is crying shame on him for staying away so long.”

Agatha threw a furious look at her sister, and dragged Miss Valery along, nor stopped till she saw the latter could hardly breathe or stand.

“Stay, my child. Harriet, you should not say such careless things. Nathanael is only absent on business—my business; he will come home soon.”

These words, uttered with difficulty, calmed the rising storm. Harrie laughingly begged pardon, and was satisfied.

“ Well, the sooner Nathanael comes, the better. There was a gentleman last night wanting him.”

“ What gentleman?”

“ Can't tell. He left no name. A little wiry shrimp of a fellow who seemed to know all about our family, Fred included ; so Duke, in his ultra-hospitality, took the creature in for the night, and this morning drove him over to Kingcombe Holm. There, don't let us bother ourselves about him. How do you feel now, Anne? Quite well, eh?”

“ Quite well,” Anne echoed in her cheerful voice that never had a tone of pain or complaining. But it seemed to strike Mr. Dugdale, who had lounged up to her side. His peculiarly gentle and observant look rested on her for a moment, and then he offered her his arm, an act of courtesy very rare in the

absent Duke Dugdale. Agatha walked on her other hand; Harrie fluttering about them, and talking very fast, chiefly about the wonderful news of yesterday, which her husband had just communicated.

“And a great shame not to tell me long before. As if I did not care for Uncle Brian as much as anybody does. What a Christmas we shall have—Uncle Brian, Nathanael, and Fred.”

“Is Major Harper coming?” The question was from Anne.

“Elizabeth hopes so. He surely will not disappoint Elizabeth. And he must come to see Uncle Brian; they were such friends, you know. All the middle-aged oddities in Kingcombe are on the *qui vive* to see Uncle Brian and Fred. They two were the finest young fellows in the neighbourhood, people say, and to think they should both come back miserable old bachelors! Nobody married but my poor Duke! Hurrah!”

So she rattled on until they reached Agatha's door. One of the Kingcombe Holm servants stood there with the carriage. Mrs. Locke Harper was wanted immediately, to dine at her father-in-law's.

"I will not go. I will not leave Miss Valery. They don't often ask me—indeed, I have never been since——No, I will not go," she added obstinately.

"Do!" entreated Anne, who had sat down, faint with walking a distance so short that no one thought of its fatiguing her—not even Agatha.

"T' Squire do want'ee very bad, Missus. Here!" And the old coachman, almost as old as his master, gave to Mrs. Harper a note, which was only the second she had ever received from her husband's father. It was a crabbed, ancient hand, blotted and blurred, then steadied resolutely into the preciseness of a schoolboy—one of those pathetic fragments of writing that irresistibly remind one

of the trembling, failing hand—the hand that once wrote brave love-letters. So fade we all !

“You are highly favoured ; my father rarely writes to any one. What does he say ?” cried Harrie, rather jealous.

Agatha read aloud :

“ MY DEAR DAUGHTER-IN-LAW,

“ Will you honour me by dining here to-day, without fail ?

“ I remain, always your affectionate Father,

“ NATHANAEL HARPER.”

“ ‘ Your affectionate Father,’ ” repeated Mrs. Dugdale. “ He hardly ever signed that to me in his life, though I am his very own daughter, and his eldest too. He never signed so to anybody but Fred. Bah ! what a big blot. He is almost past writing, poor dear father ! Come, Agatha, you cannot refuse ; you must go.”

“ She must indeed,” echoed Anne Valery.

“Even though the Squire has been so rude as never to ask me or Duke, though Duke saw him this very morning, when he rode over to Kingcombe Holm to tell the news about Uncle Brian.—Bless us, Anne, don’t look so. Is there anything astonishing in my father’s letter? How very queer everybody seems to-day!”

Agatha felt Miss Valery draw her aside.

“You will surely go, my dear, since he wishes it.”

“But if I don’t wish it—if I had far rather stay with you? Why are you so anxious for my leaving you?”

“Are you angry with me again, my child?”—Agatha clung to her fondly. “Then go. Be very gentle and good to your husband’s father. And stay—say I am coming to see him to-morrow.”

“But you cannot—you are not strong.”

“Oh yes, very strong,” Anne returned,

hastily. "Only go. I will stay contentedly with Dorcas."

Agatha went, very much against her will. She had shut herself up entirely for so long. It was a torment to see any one, above all her husband's family, who of course were constantly talking and inquiring about him. The stateliness of Kingcombe Holm chafed her beyond endurance; Mary's good-natured regrets, and Eulalie's malicious prying condolences; worst of all the penetration of Elizabeth. She fancied that they and all Kingcombe were pointing the finger at "poor Mrs. Locke Harper."

Pondering over all these things during the solitary drive, her good resolutions faded out from her, and her heart began to burn anew. It was so hard!

She crossed the hall—the same hall where she had alighted when Nathanael first brought her home. It looked dusky and dim, as then.

She almost expected to see him appear from some corner, with his light quick step and his long fair hair.

It was hard indeed—too hard! She hurried through, and never looked behind.

Eulalie and Mary were sitting solemnly in the drawing-room.

“So you are come, Mrs. Harper. We never thought you would come again. We thought you would sit for ever pining in your cage till your mate came back again. What a naughty wandering bird he is!”

“Don’t, Eulalie. No teasing. I am sure we were all very sorry for your loneliness, dear Agatha.”

“Thank you for giving yourselves that trouble.”

“Oh, no trouble at all,” said the well-meaning and simple Mary. “And we would have come to see you or fetched you here, but I had to go so much to Thornhurst while

Anne was ill, and Eulalie—somehow—I don't know—but Eulalie is always busy."

Eulalie, whose hardest toil was looking in the glass, and patting her dog's ears, assented apologetically. Perhaps she read something in her sister-in-law's face which showed her that Agatha was not to be trifled with.

"Will you go up and see Elizabeth? She has often asked for you."

"Has she? I will go after dinner," briefly answered Agatha. She would not be got rid of in that way.

"Shall we sit and talk, then, till my father comes in with that queer little man who has been with him all day? about whom Mary and I have been vainly puzzling our brains. Such an ugly little fellow, and, between you and me, not *quite* a gentleman. I wonder at papa's asking him to stay and dine. I sha'n't do the civil to him; you may."

"Thanks for the permission."

"Perhaps that is the very reason Papa

sent for you," continued Eulalie, stretching herself out on the sofa. "The person said he knew you, and asked Mary where you were living, and whether you were very happy together, you and your husband."

Agatha rose abruptly, dashing down a heavy volume that lay on her knee—she certainly was not a mild temper. While she wavered between reining in her anger, as she had last night vowed, and pouring upon Eulalie all the storm of her roused passions—the door opened, and Mr. Harper entered with his much depreciated guest.

The old gentleman was dressed with unusual care, and walked with even more of slow stateliness than ordinary. He met Agatha with his customary kindness.

"Welcome. You have been somewhat of a stranger lately. It must not happen again, my dear." And drawing her arm through his, he faced the "little ugly fellow" of Eulalie's dislike.

"Mr. Grimes, let me present you to my son's wife, Mrs. Locke Harper."

"You forget, sir," interrupted Grimes, importantly; "I have long ago had that honour, through Major——"

The old Squire started, put his hand to his forehead—"Yes, yes, I did forget. My memory, sir—my memory is as good as ever it was."

The sharp contradictory ending of his speech, the colour rising to the old man's cheek and forehead, whence it did not sink, but lay steadily, a heavy, purple blotch, attracted Agatha's notice—certainly more than Mr. Grimes did.

"I had the honour, Mrs. Harper," said the latter, bowing, "to be present when your marriage settlement was signed. I had likewise the honour of preparing the deed, by the wish and according to the express orders of Major Har——"

"That is sufficient," interrupted the Squire.

"Sir, I never burden ladies with the wearisomeness of legal discussion.—Did you drive or ride here, Agatha?"

"If you remember, you sent the carriage for me."

"Yes, yes—of course," returned the old man. "It was a pleasant drive, was it? Your husband enjoyed it too?"

"My husband is in Cornwall."

"Certainly. I understand."

Which was more than Agatha did. She could not make him out at all. The wandering eye, dulled with more than mere age—for it had been his pride that the Harper eye always sparkled to the last; the accidental twitches about the mouth, which hung loosely, and seemed unable to control its muscles; above all, the extraordinary and sudden lapse of a memory which had hitherto been wonderful for his years. There was something not right, some hidden wheel

broken or locked in the mysterious mechanism that we call human life.

Agatha felt uneasy. She wished Nathanael had been at home ; and began to consider whether some one—not herself—ought not to write and hint that his father did not seem quite well.

Meanwhile, she closely watched the old man, who seemed this day to show her more kindness and attention than ever,—there was no mistaking that. He kept her constantly at his side, talking to her with marked courtesy. Once she saw his eyes—those poor, dull, restless eyes, fixed on her with an expression that was quite unaccountable. Going in to dinner, his step, which began measured and stately, suddenly tottered. Agatha caught his arm.

“ You are not well—I am sure of it.”

“ Indeed !” said Mr. Grimes, who was following close behind, with the very reluctant Miss Mary towering over his petty head.

“No wonder that Mr. Harper is not quite well to-day.”

The Squire swerved aside, like an old steed goaded by the whip, then rose to his full height, which was taller than either of his sons—the Harpers of ancient time were a lofty generation.

“Mr. Grimes, I assure you I am quite well. Will you do me the honour to cease your anxiety about me, and lead in my daughter to her seat.”

Grimes passed on—quenched. There was something in “the grand old name of gentleman” that threw around its owner an atmosphere in which plebeian intruders could not breathe.

“A person, Agatha,” observed the Squire, as his eyes, bright with something of their old glow, followed the evidently objectionable guest—“A person to whom I show courtesy for the sake of—of my family.”

Agatha assented, though not quite certain

to what. Scanning Mr. Grimes more narrowly, she faintly remembered him, and the unpleasant, nasal-toned voice which had gabbled through her marriage settlement. She wondered what he had come to Nathanael for?—why Nathanael's father showed him such civility? On her part, the sensation of dislike, unaccountable yet instinctive dislike, was so strong, that it would have been a real satisfaction to her mind if the footmen, instead of respectfully handing Mr. Grimes his soup, had handed himself out at the dining-room window.

The dinner passed in grave formality. Even Mr. Grimes seemed out of his element, being evidently, as Eulalie had said, “not *quite* a gentleman,” either by birth or breeding, and lacking that something which makes the grandest gentlemen of all—Nature's. He tried now and then to open a conversation with the Miss Harpers, but Eulalie sneered at him aside, and Mary was politely

dignified. Agatha took very little notice of him—her attention was absorbed by her father-in-law.

Mr. Harper looked old—very old. His hands, blanched to a yellowish whiteness, moved about loosely and uncertainly. Once the large diamond mourning ring which the widower always wore, “In memory of Catherine Harper,” dropped off on the tablecloth. He did not perceive the loss until Agatha restored it, and then his fingers seemed unable to slip it on again, until his daughter-in-law aided him. In so doing, the clammy, nerveless feel of the old man’s hand made her start.

“Thank you, Mrs. Harper,” he said, acknowledging her assistance with his most solemn bend. “And Catherine—Agatha, I mean, if you would be so kind—that is——”

“Yes?” observed Agatha, inquiringly, as he made a long pause.

“To—Remind me after dinner, my dear.

I have duties now—important duties.—My friends!” Here he raised himself in his chair, looked round the dessert-laden table with one of his old smiles, half condescending, half good-humoured, then vainly put his hand on the large claret jug, which Agatha had to lift and guide to her glass—“My friends, I am delighted to see you all. And on this happy occasion let me have the honour of giving the first toast. The Reverend Frederick Harper and Mistress Mary Harper.”

Mary and Eulalie drew back. “That is grandfather and grandmother — dead fifty years ago. What does papa mean?”

But the whisper did not reach the old man, who drank the toast with all solemnity. Mr. Grimes did the same, repeating it loudly, with the addition of “long life, health, and happiness.” Every one else cast down strange, shocked looks upon her untouched glass. No one spoke.

“Do you make a long stay in Dorsetshire?”

observed the Squire, addressing himself courteously to his guest.

“That depends,” Grimes answered, with a meaning twinkle of the eye—an eye already growing moistened with too good wine.

“Did you not say,” Mary Harper continued, fancying her father looked at her to sustain the conversation—“did you not say you were intending to visit Cornwall?”

“No, ma’am. Would rather be excused. As Mr. Harper knows, the place would be too hot to hold *me* after certain circumstances.”

“Sir!” The old man tried hard to gather himself up into stern dignity, and collect the ideas that were fast floating from him.

“Sir,” he repeated, first haughtily, and then with a violence so rare to his rigidly gentlemanly demeanour that his daughters looked alarmed—“sir—at my table—before my family—I beg—I—” Here he suddenly recovered himself, changed his tone, and bowed —“I—beg your pardon.”

“ Oh, no offence, Squire; none meant, none taken. I came with the best of all intentions towards you and yours. And if things have turned out badly——”

“ Did you not say you were acquainted with Cornwall?” abruptly asked Agatha, to prevent his again irritating her father-in-law, who had leaned back, yielding to a certain weariness or torpor. He would not close his eyes, but they looked misty and heavy, and his fingers played lazily with one another on the arm of his chair; Agatha laid her own upon them—she could not help it. She lost her fear of the repellant Mr. Harper in the old man, so helpless and feeble. She wished she had come oftener to Kingcombe Holm, and been more attentive and daughter-like to Nathanael's father.

“ As to Cornwall,” said Grimes, in a confidential whisper, “ between you and me, Mrs. Harper, mum's the word.”

Agatha drew herself up haughtily;—but looked at the old Squire and grew patient.

She even tried to eke out the flagging conversation, and luckily remembered the news which Duke Dugdale had that morning ridden over to communicate. She could not help thinking it very odd that no one in the house had hitherto mentioned Mr. Brian Harper's expected return.

"Shall you not be very glad, Mary, to see Uncle Brian. You have heard, of course, how soon he will be here?"

"Uncle Brian here!—And nobody told us. Only think, papa——"

"My dear Mary!"—There was a gentleness in the Squire's voice more startling even than his violence.

"Did you know, papa, that Uncle Brian is coming home?"

"I think—I—Yes"—with a struggle at recollection—"my son-in-law told me that some commercial business which Brian is transacting for him will bring my brother home. I shall be very happy to see him.

You too will all be delighted to see your Uncle Brian."

"An uncle? The usual rich uncle from abroad, eh?" whispered Mr. Grimes to Agatha. "I ask merely for your own sake, ma'am, and that of my friend Nathanael."

Agatha curled her lip. That the fellow should dare to speak of "my friend Nathanael!" She glanced at Mary that they might leave the drawing-room, when seeing her father-in-law was about to speak, she paused.

The old Squire rose in his customary manner of giving healths. His voice was quavering but loud, as if he could scarcely hear it himself, and tried to make it rise above a whirl of sounds that filled his brain.

"My friends and children—my"—here he looked uncertainly at Agatha—"Yes, I remember, my daughter-in-law—allow me to give one toast more—Health, long life, and every blessing to my son—my youngest,

worthiest, *only* remaining son and heir, Nathanael."

"*Only* son!"—Every one recoiled. The worn-out brain had certainly given way. Mary and Eulalie exchanged frightened glances. Agatha alone, touched by the unexpected tribute to her husband, did not notice the one momentous word.

"Now, Squire, that's hardly fair," cried Mr. Grimes, bursting into a hoarse vinous laugh. "A man may go wrong sometimes, but to be thrown overboard for it, and by one's father too—think better of it, old fellow. And ladies, by way of an antidote, allow me to give a toast—Success to my worthy and honourable—*exceedingly* honourable client, Major Frederick Harper."

The old Squire leaped up in his chair, with eyes starting from their sockets. His lips gurgled out some inarticulate sound scarcely human; his right arm shook and quivered with his vain efforts to raise it;

still it hung nerveless by his side. Consciousness and will yet lingered in his brain, but physical life and speech had gone for ever. He fell down struck by that living death—that worse than death, of old age—paralysis.

CHAPTER III.

THE whole household was in terror and disorder. Eulalie had rushed screaming from the room—Mary went about, trembling like a leaf, trying to get restoratives—Agatha knelt on the floor, supporting the old man's head in her lap, speaking to him sometimes, as by the motion and apparent intelligence of his eyes she fancied he might possibly understand her.

“ Oh, he is dead, he is dead,” cried Mary, as she took up the senseless hand, and let it fall again with a burst of tears.

“ No, he is not dead—he hears you;—take

care," said Agatha, putting the frightened daughter aside with a firmness and command which rose in her, as in similar characters such powers do rise, equal to the necessity. She looked on the trembling Mary—on the servants gathering round with silent horror, and saw there were none who, so to speak, "had their wits about them," except herself. Scarcely knowing how she did it, she instinctively assumed the rule. She, the young girl of nineteen, who had never till then been placed in any position of trial.

"Send all these people away. Quick, Mary! Bring some one who can carry him to his room. And—stay, Eulalie, sit down there and be quiet. Don't let any one go and alarm Elizabeth."

She gave these orders, and everybody listened and obeyed; people are so ready to obey any guiding spirit at such a crisis. Then she bent down again over the poor corpse-like figure that rested against her knee,

kissed the old man's forehead, and tried to comfort him. She had heard of cases, when though deprived of speech and motion, the sufferer was still conscious of all passing around him. Therefore she wished as soon as possible to remove her father-in-law out of the way of the terrified household.

He was carried to his room through the hall where he had lately trod so stately,—the poor old man now helpless as the dead. Leaving the dining-room, Agatha thought she saw his eyes turn back, as if he knew that he was crossing the doorway he would never cross more, and wanted to take a last look at the familiar things. Otherwise he seemed continually watching herself. She walked beside him till he was laid upon his bed, and then tried again to speak to him. She did it caressingly, as though the old dying man had been a sick child.

“Be content, now—quite content. I will take care of you, and see that all is done

right. I shall not be away two minutes; I am only going to send for help—your own doctor from Kingcombe. We must try to get you well. Lie here quiet.”

Quiet! One might as well have enjoined stillness to a corpse! Agatha shuddered when she had used the word. For a moment the dread of her position rose upon her. In that lonely house, at night too, with no help nearer than Kingcombe; and even then no husband, no friend—for she dared not send to poor, sick Anne Valery. And she so young, so inexperienced.—But no matter! She would try to meet everything — accomplish everything. She felt already calm and brave.

The first thing necessary was to send for medical aid. This she did; having the forethought to write a few clear lines, lest the messenger should fail. She despatched word likewise to the Dugdales. She felt quite composed; everything right to be remem-

bered came clearly into her head. It was the grand touchstone of her character; the crisis of danger which shows whether a woman has that presence of mind which exalts her into a domestic heroine, an angel of comfort; or the weakness which sinks her into a helpless selfish fool.

The latter was hardly likely to become a true picture of Agatha Harper.

She went about with Mary, giving some orders to the servants, for sickness always comes startlingly upon an unprepared and unaccustomed house; and tried to find a few soothing words for the terrified Eulalie, who clung crying about them both, forgetting all her affectations. If the Beauty had any love left in her, it was for her father. Lastly, Agatha took a light, and went swiftly along the passages to the distant wing of the house which Elizabeth occupied.

“Miss Harper,” her maid said, “had gone quietly to rest, and was then fast sleeping.”

Poor Elizabeth ! this seemed the hardest point of all.

“ When did she see her father ? ”

“ This morning. The master always comes up every morning after breakfast to see Miss Harper.”

And they would never see one another again, this helpless father and daughter—never, till they met, bodiless, in the next world !

For the moment Agatha felt her courage fail. She glided quickly from the door, but came back again. Elizabeth had waked, and called her.

“ What is the matter ? I know something is the matter.”

“ Do tell her,” whispered the maid. “ She’ll find it out anyhow—she finds out everything. And she has been so ill all day.”

Agatha entered. There was no deceiving those eyes. “ Elizabeth, dear Elizabeth—your father—it is very hard, but—your fa-

ther——” She hesitated ; it was so difficult to convey, even in gentlest words, the cruel truth. Miss Harper regarded her keenly. The bearer of ill-tidings is always soon betrayed, and Agatha’s was not a face to disguise anything. Elizabeth’s head dropped back on the pillow.

“I perceive. He is an old man. He has gone home before me. My dear father !”

The perfect composure with which she said this astonished Agatha. She did not understand how near Elizabeth always lived to the unknown world, and how welcome and beautiful it was in her familiar sight.

“No ; he is alive still. But, if he should not come in to see you to-morrow morning——”

“I shall go unto him ; he shall not return unto me,” murmured Elizabeth, as her eyelids fell, and a few tears dropped through the lashes. “Tell me the rest, will you ?”

“He has been seized with paralysis, I think ; he cannot speak or move, but seems

still conscious. I do not know how it will end."

"One way—only one way; I feared this long. My grandfather died so. Agatha"—calling after her, for she was stealing away, she could not bear it—"Agatha, you will take care of him?"

"I will, as his own daughter."

"And, if possible——" here Elizabeth's voice faltered a little—"give my love to my dear father."

Agatha fled away. She hid herself in the recess close by "Anne's window," as it was called, and for a minute or two cried violently. It did her good. With those tears all the selfishness, anger, and pain flowed out of her heart, leaving it purer and more peaceful than it had been for a long time. It was not a foolish, miserable girl, but a brave, tender-hearted, sensible woman, who entered the door of the sick-chamber where the poor old man lay.

No one was there but the coachman who had carried his master up-stairs. Many servants hovered about the door, but none dared enter. Either they were afraid of the Squire—afraid even now, or else the motionless figure that lay within the bed-curtains was too like death. Old John sat beside it, with tears running down his cheeks.

“Oh, Mrs. Harper, look at th’ Master. He be all alive in’s mind. He do want bad to speak to we. Look at ’un, Missus!”

“Give me your place, John. I will try to understand him. Father!”—She faltered a little over the word, but felt it was the right word, now. The old man moved his head towards her with a feeble smile. The expression of his face was clearer and more natural, only for that terribly painful inarticulate murmur, which no one could comprehend.

“I have done all I could think of,” Agatha continued, speaking softly and cheer-

fully. "The doctor will be here soon; Mary and Eulalie are down-stairs. I have myself told Elizabeth that you are ill;—she is composed, and sends her love to her dear father. Was all this right?"

Mr. Harper appeared to assent.

"I will sit beside you till the doctor comes, and then I will write to my husband. You would like him to come home?"

He seemed slow of comprehension, troubled, or excited. Agatha vainly tried to analyse the dumb expression of the features. With all her quickness she could not make out what he wanted. At last, a thought struck her. His eldest son, his favourite—

"Would you like me to send for Major Harper?"

No words could tell the change which convulsed the old man. Abhorrence—anger—fear—all were written in his countenance. He rolled his head on the pillow, he struggled to gasp out something—what,

his daughter-in-law could not guess. She was inexpressibly shocked. One thing only seemed clear, that for some cause or other the mere mention of Frederick's name worked up the father into frenzy.

"Hush! do not try to speak. I will send for no one but Nathanael. Will that content you?"

He made a motion of satisfaction, and became quiet. His features gradually composed themselves, and he sank into torpor.

Agatha still sat by the bed, holding his wrist, for she knew not moment by moment how soon the pulse might stop. The old man's own daughters were too terrified to approach him. They came on tiptoe to the door, looked in, shuddered, and went back. No one stayed in the room but the old coachman, who had been Mr. Harper's servant since they were both boys; and he sat in a corner crying like a child, though silently. Agatha might as well have sat there quite

alone, the atmosphere around her was so still and solemn.

She had never before been in her father-in-law's room—the state bedroom, in which for centuries the Harper family had been born and died. The great oak bed itself was almost like a bier, with its dark velvet hangings and dusty plumes. Everything around was dusty, gloomy, and worn out; the Squire would have nothing changed from the time when the last Mrs. Harper died there. In a little curtained alcove the lace hung yellow and dusty over her toilet-table, just as she had left it when the summons came, and she laid herself down to motherhood—and death. Her portraits—one girlish, another matronly, but still merry and fair—hung opposite the bed. Between them was a longitudinal family-group, in the very lowest style of art—a string of children, from the big boy to the tottering baby, in all varieties of impossible attitudes. Their names were

written under (not unnecessarily)—Frederick, Emily, Harriet, Mary, Eulalie. The only names missed were Nathanael and “poor Elizabeth.”

Mechanically Agatha observed all these things during the first half-hour of her vigil; involuntarily her mind floated away to musings concerning them, until she forcibly impelled it back to consider the present. It was in vain. Innumerable conjectures flitted through her brain, but not one which she could catch hold of as a truth. Of one thing only she felt sure, that something very serious must have happened—some great mental shock, too powerful for the Squire's feeble old age. And this shock was certainly in some way or other connected with Major Harper.

An hour later, when she was beginning to count every beat of the old man's pulse, and look forward with dread to a midnight

vigil beside that breathing corpse, the doctor came.

Agatha waited for his dictum—it needed very little skill to decide that. A few questions—a shake of the head—a solemn condolatory sigh; and all knew that the old Squire's length of days was numbered.

“How long?” whispered Mrs. Harper, half closing the door as they came out.

“I cannot say. Some hours—days—possibly a week. We never know in these cases. But, I fear, certainly within a week.”

What would be “within a week?” Why is it that every one dreads to say the simple word “*die*?”

Agatha paused. She had never yet stood face to face in a house with death. The sensation was very awful. She glanced within at the heavy-curtained bed, and then at the fair, girlish portrait which peered through the

folds at its foot—the painted eyes, eternally young, seeming to keep watch smilingly. The old man and his long-parted wife, to be together again—“within a week.” It was strange—strange.

“His sons should be sent for,” hinted the doctor. “Mr. Locke Harper is in Cornwall, I believe; but the other—Major Harper——”

“Frederick—Yes, we must send for Frederick,” sobbed Mary. “My father cares more for him than for any of us. Oh, poor Frederick!”

“But,” Eulalie said—they were all whispering together at the door—“I don’t think any one of us, not even Elizabeth, knows Frederick’s address just now. A week ago he was passing through London, but he does make such a mystery of his comings and goings. Oh, if he were only here!”

“Ask my father,” cried Mary—“ask him if he would like to see Frederick.”

As she said this rather too loudly, there was a strange smothered sound from the bed. Agatha ran. The old Squire was gasping, choking, with the frightful effort to speak. His face was purple—his eyes wild—yet the poor bound tongue refused to obey his will.

“Hush! be composed,” said his daughter-in-law, soothingly. “You shall see no one. No one shall be sent for. Will that do?”

He grew calmer, but restless still.

“Shall my husband come? He will do you good—he does everybody good. Would you like to see Nathanael?”

A faint assent—scarcely intelligible—and then the Squire dropped off again into torpor. Agatha left him and went to his daughters, who lingered outside.

“I think Major Harper has somehow vexed him. He will only see my husband. A messenger must be sent to Cornwall. Who will write?”

“Who but yourself,” said Eulalie, hardly able even then to repress a look, beneath which Agatha’s cheek glowed fiery red; “who so fit as yourself to tell this to your husband?”

“You are right;” and she smothered down her swelling heart into a grave dignity. “Get the messenger ready—I will write here—in this room.”

She turned within—closed the door—looked once more at the old man, trying by that mournful sight to still the earthly anger that was again rising in her heart,—and sat down to write.

It was a hard task. She scribbled the date, and paused. This, strangely enough, was the first letter she had ever written to him. She did not know how to begin it. Her heart beat—her fingers trembled. To tell such news to the dearest friend and husband that ever woman had, would be a difficult and painful thing, and for her to tell it

to him, as they were now ! For the first letter he ever had from her to be this ! And how could she write it ?—she who till to-day would almost have cut off her right hand rather than have humbled herself to write to him at all. Yet now all the wrath was melting out of her, and tenderness welling up afresh. We always feel so tender and loving over those that are in trouble.

“Yes, I will do it,” muttered Agatha, with quivering lips. And she wrote firmly the words—“*My dear husband.*” They seemed at the same time to imprint themselves on her heart as a truth—invisible sometimes, yet when brought near to the fire of strong emotion or suffering, found ineffaceably written there.

The letter contained nothing noticeable—it was a mere brief explanation and summons ; but it bore the words, duty-words certainly—yet which no duty would have

forced Agatha to write had they been untrue—" *My dear husband*"—" *Your affectionate wife.*"

She despatched it, and re-entered the sick-room. All was quiet there—the very hopelessness of the case produced quiet. There was nothing to be done, watched for, or awaited. Doctor Mason sat by his patient, as he had declared his intention of doing through the night. He sat mournfully, for he was a kind, good man—the family attendant for thirty years.

"Let all go to bed," he said to Agatha, seeming to understand at once that she was the moving spirit in the family. "Make the house perfectly quiet, and then——"

"I will come and sit up with you."

Doctor Mason looked compassionately at the slight girlish figure, and the face already wan with the reaction after excitement. "My dear Mrs. Harper, would not a servant do as well?"

"No, I am his son's wife. What should I say to my husband if—if anything happened, and he not there, nor I?"

"Good. Then stay," said the doctor, kindly grasping her hand. He was a man of few words.

It took some time and patience to quiet the house, and persuade Mary and Eulalie to retire. When all was done, and Agatha passed swiftly, lamp in hand, through the dark, solitary rooms, she felt half frightened. The house seemed so silent—already so full of death.

There was one thing more to be done—to write a line ready for Anne Valery's waking, otherwise she would expect her home, as she had promised, in the early morning. How would she tell all these horrors, even in the gentlest way, to the feeble Anne, for whom, however unknown to others, and disguised by the invalid herself, Agatha felt an ever-present dread that

she in vain tried to believe was only born of strong attachment. We never deeply love anything for which we do not likewise continually fear. Agatha almost recoiled from the idea of mentioning danger or death to Anne Valery.

She went into the dining-room to write. Everything there appeared just as when this great shock struck the household into confusion; the dessert was not removed—the wine in which he had drunk Nathanael's health remained yet in Mr. Harper's glass. Agatha shrank back. She half expected to see some shadowy form—not himself but Death, rise and sit in the arm-chair whence the old man had fallen.

Brave she was, but she was still a girl, and a girl of strong imagination. Her heart beat audibly; she put the lamp down in the middle of the room, where it might cast more light, and render less ghastly the last flicker of one wax-candle, the fellows of

which had been left to burn out in their sockets. Then she sat down, covered her eyes, and tried to think connectedly of all that had happened this night.

Something touched her. She leaped up—would have screamed, but that she remembered the room overhead—*the* room. She crouched down—again covering her eyes.

Another touch, and a stirring in the window-curtain near which she sat. There was something—every one knows that horrible sensation—*something* else in the room besides herself.

“Who is it?” she said, still not looking up, frightened at her own voice.

“It’s me, ma’am—only me.”

Everybody in the house had forgotten Mr. Grimes.

Half-intoxicated at the time of Mr. Harper’s seizure, he had stayed behind in the dining-room, drank himself stupid, and slept

himself sober—or partly so. They say drink is a great unfolders of truth ; if so, the old lawyer's sharp face betrayed that in spite of all his past civility, he had not the kindest feeling in the world towards the Harper family.

“ So, young lady, I frightened you ? You did not expect to find me here.”

“ I did not, indeed ; I had quite forgotten your very existence,” said Mrs. Harper, point-blank. She had conceived a great dislike to Mr. Grimes, and Agatha was a girl who never took much trouble to disguise her aversions.

“ Thank you, ma'am. You are polite, like the rest of the Harpers. But words, fair or foul, won't pay anything. Where's the Squire ? He and I have not yet settled the little business I came about.”

“ Mr. Grimes, perhaps you are not aware that my father-in-law is dangerously ill—

can enter upon no business, and see no person."

"In—deed?" His thorough insolence of manner brought Agatha's dignity back. She remembered that she was a lady belonging to the house, and that this fellow, whose behaviour made his grey hairs so little worthy of respect, was her father-in-law's invited guest.

"Sir," she said, drawing up her little figure, and trying to look as much Mrs. Locke Harper as possible, "you must be aware that in the present state of the house a stranger's presence is undesirable. It is not too late to order out the carriage. Will you favour me by going to sleep at Kingcombe?"

Mr. Grimes looked disposed to object, but she had her hand on the bell, and her manner, though perfectly civil, was resolute—so resolute, that he became humble.

"Well, Mrs. Harper, I'm willing to oblige

a former client, but I should like to put to you a few questions before leaving."

"Put them."

"First—what's wrong with the old gentleman?"

"He has had a paralytic stroke—probably caused, the doctor says, by some great shock, which was too much for him, being an old man."

The other old man looked uneasy, as though some touch of nature smote him for the moment.

"You don't think"—here he crept backward, shambling and cowardly—"you don't think I had any hand in causing this—this very melancholy occurrence."

"You?" There was undisguised scorn in Agatha's lip. As if any Mr. Grimes could do harm to a Harper! "Nothing of the kind—pray do not disquiet your conscience unnecessarily."

"But I did bring him unpleasant news,

for which I'm rather sorry now. I had much better have told his son. When shall I be likely to see my friend Nathanael?"

His friend Nathanael! Agatha could have crushed him and stamped upon him, had he been worth it.

"Mr. Locke Harper," she said, trying hard to keep her temper—"Mr. Locke Harper will be at home to-morrow night. You can then make to him any communications you please. At present the greatest benefit you can confer on this sad house is to absent yourself from it."

"'Pon my life, Mrs. Harper, you might waste a little more breath on me, lest I might think it worth while to spend a little too much breath on you and yours. Do you know what claim I have upon your family?"

"That of being Major Harper's lawyer, I believe, and possibly mine before my marriage. It is not likely that my husband has continued to use your services afterwards."

Agatha said this sharply, for she was annoyed to feel herself in such total darkness regarding her husband's affairs. For a moment she felt half alarmed at the expression, "My friend Nathanael." Could they be allied, he and this disagreeable man? Could Grimes have acquired any power over him, that he was smiling in such a sinister, mysterious way?

"My services? Really, Mrs. Harper, this is very amusing. You surely must be aware that your husband has not the slightest occasion for anybody's services in the management of his affairs. One can't make something out of nothing, and when there is not a halfpenny left——"

"Explain yourself."

"My dear young lady, is it possible you don't know the unfortunate circumstance, at least one of the unfortunate circumstances which brought me here? Why, Mr. Locke Harper knew it months ago. He and I had several conferences together on the subject.

But we husbands are obliged to be uncommunicative, as my wife would tell you, if you had the pleasure of knowing Mrs. Grimes——”

“Will you keep to the point, sir?” said Agatha, sternly. She felt very stern—very bitter. The old wound was re-opening sorer than ever. Nathanael had “held conferences” with this fellow—confided to him secrets which he had not told to her—his own wife! Here was a new pang—a new indignity. In its sharpness she forgot everything else; even the silent room overhead. She had just self-possession and pride enough not to question; she would have been more than human had she not paused to hear.

“Well, Mr. Grimes!” she said, confronting him, her hand still on the door, where she had placed it as a mute signal which he refused to understand.

“I own, Mrs. Harper, it is a hard case. At the time I really felt as sorry for you as

if you had been my own daughter. All to happen so soon after your marriage, too! Some persons might blame me for consenting to keep back the facts, but I assure you Major Harper compelled me to draw up the settlement exactly according to his orders."

"Sir—will you hasten your speech—my time is occupied."

"So is mine, madam, fully occupied. I shall waste no more of it in giving advice to young women that are as proud as peacocks, and as poor as church-mice. If it wasn't for that highly respectable young man, your husband, I should say it served you right."

"What?" said Agatha, beneath her breath.

"Mr. Locke Harper found out, a month after his marriage, that somebody had made ducks and drakes of all his wife's property. So, as I hear, the poor young man has had to turn land-steward just to keep his

kitchen fire burning. That's all. Very odd you don't know it."

"I do now."

"Well, you take it quietly enough. You seem quite satisfied."

"I am so."

Mr. Grimes regarded her in perfect bewilderment. She showed no token of dismay or grief, but stood calmly by the open door.

"I'm not satisfied though," cried he, at last growing heated—"I'm not going to have shareholders coming down upon me, and be hunted from London and from my profession, just because Major Harper——"

"I would rather not hear of Major Harper, or any one else, to-night. Once more—will you oblige me by leaving?"

Her thorough self-possession, her air of command—controlled the man in spite of himself. He moved away, bidding her a civil good-night.

“Good-night, Mr. Grimes; I will light you to the door.”

“Ugh!” He gave a grunt—seemed inclined to hesitate—looked up at Mrs. Harper, and—obeyed.

Agatha came slowly back through the hall, feeling all stunned and stupified. She sat down, smoothed her hair back with her hands, heaved one or two weary sighs, and tried to think what had happened to her.

“So, I am no heiress. I have lost all my money, and am quite poor. He knows it—knew it a long time ago, and did not tell me. Why did he not tell me, I wonder?”

Here was a pause. For a moment she felt inclined to doubt the fact itself; truthful people have little suspicion of chicanery or falsehood, and when she came to think, innumerable circumstances confirmed Grimes's statement. Yes, it must be true. This, then, was Nathanael's secret. Why had he kept it from her?

“As if he thought I cared for money ! As if”—and a choking filled her throat—“as if I would have minded being ever so poor, did he only love me !”

The thought burst out naturally, like water forcing its way through muddy reeds—showing how, deep down, there lay the living spring.

“Now, let me consider. He must have had some strong reason for keeping this secret. It cost him much. How I wearied him about not taking the house ; how angry I was at his acceptance of the stewardship. And it was for me he wished to toil—for me, and for our daily bread ! Yet he would not tell me. And all the while he must have had numberless cares and anxieties without, and his own wife blindly tormenting him at home. Last of all I called him *mercenary*. And what did he answer ? Nothing ! Not one reproach—not one word of anger. Yet still—he kept his secret. Why ?”

Here she paused again. All was mystery.

“It might have been through tenderness—to save me pain. Yet no—for he could not but see how his silence stung me. Then since he kept not this secret for love of me—and I am hardly worth such loving—it must have been from some motive, perhaps higher than love—some bond of honour which he could not break. Did he not say something to that effect once? Let me think.”

Again she sat down, and so far as her excited feelings would allow, tried to summon back all the story of their acquaintance, courtship, marriage—a six-months' tale—how brief, yet how full. Amidst its confusion, amidst all the variations of her own feelings, stood out one steadfast image—her husband.

His character was peculiar—very peculiar. Its strength, reticence, power of silentness and self-control, were beyond her compre-

hension ; but its uprightness, truth, and rigid immaculate honour—she could understand those. It must have been his sense of honour and moral right that in some way impelled this concealment, even at the hazard of wounding the wife he loved—if he ever had loved her.

For a minute or so Agatha's mind almost lost its balance, rocking on this one point of torture—then it settled. “ *God knows I did love you, Agatha.*” He had said so—he who never uttered a falsehood. It was enough.

“ Yet—he ‘*did*’ love me ; that means he does not now. I have wearied him out with my folly, my coldness, and at length with that one last insulting wrong. I—to tell him he ‘married me for my money’—when all the while I was a beggar on his hands ! Yet he never betrayed a word. Oh, no wonder he despises me. No wonder he has ceased loving me. He never can love me any more.”

She burst into a passion of tears, and so remained for long. At last a sudden thought seemed to dart through her sorrow. She leaped upright, clasping her hands above her head in the rapturous attitude of a child.

“There is a better thing than love—goodness. And whether he loves me or not, he is all good in himself. I know that now. It is I only that have been wicked, and have lost him. No matter. Anne was right. My noble husband! I would not give my faith in him even for his love for me!”

She said this in a delirium of joy—a woman's pure joy, when she can set aside the selfish craving for love, and live only in the worthiness of the object beloved. It was beautiful to see Agatha as she stood, her features and form all radiant. One person, creeping in, did see her.

Old John, the coachman, stood in the doorway with his mournful face.

Agatha awoke to realities. Death all but

present in the house—misfortune following—and she had given way to that burst of joy!

She drew her hand across her forehead—sat down at the table—wrote the three lines she had intended to Anne Valery, and then went her way, to watch all night long beside her husband's father.

CHAPTER IV.

A NIGHT and a day had passed, and the household had grown somewhat accustomed to the cloud that hung over it. It was but natural. How soon do most families settle themselves after a great shock!—how easily does any grief become familiar and bearable! Likewise, saddest thought of all—how seldom is any one really missed from among us, painfully missed, for longer than a few days—a few hours.

By evening, when all Kingcombe was yet talking over the “shocking event” at Kingcombe Holm, the “afflicted family” had subsided into its usual ways—a little more

grave perhaps, but still composed. Some voluble new grief there arose when Anne Valery came—Anne, ever foremost in entering the house of mourning—and took her place among the daughters of the family, ready to give sympathy, counsel, and comfort. It was all she was strong enough to do now. The chief position in the household was still left to Agatha.

Dr. Mason gave his directions, and went away. There was nothing more to be done or hoped for. The form which lay in the Squire's bedroom might lay there for days, weeks, months—without change. The old coachman and his wife watched their master alternately; but he took little notice of them. In every conscious moment his whole attention was fixed upon Agatha. His eyes followed her about the room; when she talked to him he feebly smiled. She could not imagine why this should be, but she felt glad. It was so sweet to know herself in any way a comfort to the father of Nathanael.

She sat for hours by the old man's bedside, trying to think of nothing but him. What were all these worldly things, loss of fortune or youth, or even love itself, to the spirit that lay on the verge of a closed life—passing swiftly into eternity?

So she sat—and strove to forget all that had happened, or was happening to herself; ay, though every now and then she would start, fancying there was a voice in the hall, or a step at the door. And she would hesitate whether to run away and hide herself from her husband's presence, or wait and let him find her in her right place—beside his dying father.

And then—how would he meet her? how look—how speak? Yet these conjectures were selfish. Most likely he would scarcely notice her—his heart would be so full of other thoughts. What right had she, his erring wife, to obtrude herself upon his feelings at such a time? She could only look

at him, and watch him, and help him in everything silently. Alas, she might not even dare to comfort him !

Towards evening the suspense of expectation grew fainter, from the bare fact of its having lasted so many hours. Agatha went down in the course of dinner. The dining-table looked as usual, only fuller, from the presence of the Dugdales and Miss Valery. Mary had of necessity taken her father's place, but not his chair—it was put aside against the wall, and nobody looked that way.

Agatha seated herself next to Miss Valery, quietly—they were all so very quiet. Anne whispered, "How is he?" and the rest listened for the answer—the usual answer, which all foreknew. Then Harriet made an attempt to speak of other things—of how the rain pattered against the window-panes, and what an ill night it was for Nathanael's journey. She even began to doubt whether he would come.

“He is sure to come,” said Miss Valery.

And while she was yet speaking there swept round the house a wild burst of storm, in the midst of which were faintly discerned the sound of a horse's feet. They all cried out—“He is here!”

A minute more, and he was in the room—drenched through—flushed with riding against wind and rain. But it was himself, his own self, and his wife saw him.

When those who are much thought of return from absence, for the first minute they almost always seem unlike the image in our hearts.—It was not thus that Agatha had remembered her husband. Not thus—abrupt, agitated, almost trembling with emotion; anything but the calm and grave Nathanael.

He looked eagerly round the room—all rose; but Miss Valery was the first to take his hand.

"Thanks, Anne, I knew you would be with them. Is he——"

"Just the same—no change."

The young man breathed hard. "Are you all here?" He took his three sisters and kissed them one after the other, silently, brotherly—Anne likewise. There was one left out—his wife, who had hidden behind the rest. But soon' she heard her name.

"Is Agatha with you?"

She approached. Her husband took her hand—paused a moment—and then touched her cheek with his lips, as he had done to his sisters. He did not look at her or speak—it seemed as if he were not able.

They drew round Nathanael, nearly all weeping. There was, as is natural at such times, an unusual outburst of family tenderness. And, as was natural also, no one seemed to think of the young wife—the stranger in

the circle. Agatha slid away from the group and disappeared.

Shortly after, she had taken her usual place in the sick-room. It had struck her that the old man ought to be prepared for his son's coming, so she had at once proceeded to his bedside. But it was useless—he was sleeping. She sat down noiselessly in her old seat, and watched, as she had done for many an hour in this long day, the merry-smiling portrait at the foot of the bed—her husband's mother, whom he never saw.

While she sat, footsteps entered the room. Agatha turned quickly round to motion the intruder to silence, and perceived that it was Nathanael.

She fancied — nay, was sure — that he started when he saw her. Still, he came forward. She rose, and would have given him her seat, but he put his hand on her shoulder, and gently pressed her down again.

The old servant who watched near her went respectfully to the further end of the room.

It was a solemn scene ; the dim light—the total silence, broken only by the feeble breathing of the old man, who lay passive as death, without death's sanctity of calm. Over all, that gay youthful portrait which the lamp-light, excluded from the bed, kindled into wonderfully vivid life—far more like life than the sleeper below.

The young man stood mournfully watching his father, until startled by a flash of fire-light on the canvas, his eyes wandered to the painted smile of his unknown mother, and then turned back again to the pillows—the same pillows where she died. His fingers began to twitch nervously, though his features remained still. Slowly, Agatha saw large tears rise and roll down his cheeks. Her heart yearned over her husband, but

she dared not speak. She could but weep—not outwardly, but inwardly, with exceeding bitter pangs.

At length the old man stirred. Agatha remembered her duty as nurse, and hastily whispered her husband :

“I think, if you would move aside for a minute. Don't let him see you suddenly—it will startle him.”

“That is thoughtful of you. But who will tell him?”

“I will—he is used to me. Are you awake, *father*?”

Nathanael caught the word, and looked surprised.

“Dear father,” she continued, soothingly, “will you not try to wake now? Here is some one come to see you—some one you will be glad to see.”

The Squire's eyes grew wild; he uttered a thick painful murmur.

“Some one who was sure to come when he knew you were ill—your son.” She paused, shocked at the frenzied expression of the old man’s face. “Nay—your younger son—Nathanael—may he come?”

She perceived some faint assent, beckoned to her husband, saw him take her place at the bedside, and then stole away, leaving the son alone with his father.

Agatha rejoined the rest of the family. They were all sitting talking together as Nathanael had left them. After her leaving, they said, he had hardly spoken at all, but had gone up directly after her.

In about half an hour the brother re-appeared—greatly agitated. His sisters all turned to him as he entered, but he avoided their eyes. Agatha never lifted hers; she sat in a dim corner behind Miss Valery.

“What do you think of him, Nathanael?” asked Mary, in a low voice.

“I cannot yet tell; I want to hear how he was seized. Which of you saw most of him yesterday?”

“No one, unless it was Agatha. He was shut up in his study until she came.”

“And who has been most with him since?”

“Agatha.”

A soft expression dawned in the young man's eyes as they sought the dim corner.

“Will Agatha tell me what *she* thinks of my father's state?”

This appeal, so direct—so unexpected—could not be gainsaid.

Yet, when Nathanael addressed her, Agatha's agitation was so visible that it attracted observation—especially Mrs. Dugdale's.

“Poor child,” said Harrie, compassionately, “how pale she looks.”

“No wonder,” Mary added. “She is more worn out than any of us. She sat up all last night.”

Nathanael's eyes were on his wife again,

full of ineffable gentleness. "Agatha, come over and rest in this arm-chair. I want to talk to you about my father."

She obeyed. He spoke in a low voice :

"I feel deeply your having been so kind to *him*."

"It was right. I was glad to do it."

"What do you think caused his illness?"

"Doctor Mason said, it was probably some severe mental shock."

Nathanael looked alarmed. "Indeed ! and did the rest of the family know anything ?—guess anything?"

"Nothing."

Her husband fixed on her a penetrating gaze ; she returned it steadily.

"Agatha," he hurriedly said, "you are a sensible girl—more so than any of my sisters. I want to consult with you alone. Come and walk up and down the room with me where they cannot overhear us."

She did so. How strange it was !

“Do you think my father had any sudden ill news? Did he see any person yesterday?”

“A stranger came to him. Your brother’s lawyer, Mr. Grimes.”

“Grimes? Oh, my poor father!”

He sat down abruptly, in extreme distress. Agatha wondered at his mingling the two names, and that his first thought should have been of his father.

“Did any one else see Grimes?”

“I did.”

“What did he say to you? Was it”—he dropped his head, and spoke half inaudibly —“was it anything about my brother?”

Agatha marvelled, even with a sort of pain. Father, brother, every one before her! “He never named Major Harper, that I can remember. But he said——”

“What?”

Agatha drew back. How could she speak of such petty things as money and fortune

then! She answered, softly, and with a full heart:

“Never mind. It was a mere trifle, not worth telling, or even thinking of now. Another time.”

Nathanael regarded his wife doubtfully, but she bore the look. She was speaking the simple truth. Loss of fortune did seem “a mere trifle” now, when he was safe back again, and she sat in his presence, he talking to her as gently as in the olden time. Her simplicity in worldly things was so extreme that even Nathanael passed it over as impossible. He only said:

“Well, all must come out ere long. We cannot think of it now. Tell me more about my poor father.”

“There is little more to tell. His manner was rather strange, I thought, all dinner-time. He drank healths as usual—especially yours. His mind was wandering then,

for he called you his *only* son. Then Mr. Grimes gave another toast—Major Harper. At that moment your father fell from his chair.”

Nathanael started up—“ I knew it would be so. He could not bear such shame, my poor old father !” His face dropped on his hands ; whatever pang he suffered, it was very strong—and silent.

“ Nathanael,” cried Harrie, from the fire-side group, “ come and give us your opinion. I say that he ought to be sent for at once.”

“ Who ?”

“ Frederick.”

Nathanael started from his seat, scarcely knowing what he did.

“ Never—never ! Here have I used every effort, smothered every feeling, made every sacrifice, to save my poor father from knowing——No matter ! You may talk as you like, but I say Frederick shall never enter these doors. He is his father’s murderer !”

“Hush!” cried Anne Valery, running to him, while the others stood aghast. She only knew what fearful storms can be roused in these quiet natures, ordinarily still and grey as a thunder-brooding August sky.

“I will not hush. I have been silent too long over his wrong-doing.”

“But some”—breathed Anne scarce audibly—“some whom he wronged have been silent for a lifetime.”

Nathanael paused ; Anne’s reasoning was from facts unknown to him ; but he saw the agony in her face. She continued in a whisper :

“Be slow to judge him, if only for his sisters’ sakes—his dead mother’s—the honour of the family.”

“I have thought only too much of all these things.”

“Then, for his father’s sake—his father, who is going away to the other world leaving a son unforgiven. Beware how you

not only take your brother's birthright, but seal your brother's curse."

"God forbid. Oh, Anne—Anne!"

He pressed his hand over his eyes, and leaned back a moment—leaning, though he did not know it, against his wife, who had stolen behind his chair. No one else came near; they all shrank from their brother as if he were suddenly gone mad. Looking up, he saw only Miss Valery.

"Forgive me, Anne; I cannot control myself as I used to do; I have been very ill lately, but don't tell my wife."

Anne took no notice, perhaps she wished the wife should learn the husband's real heart as she—his old friend—knew it.

"Don't think I would harm Frederick. Not for worlds. Do you know," and his voice lowered, "I dare not trust myself even to be just over his misdeeds, lest I should be slaying my enemy."

"Your enemy? It is too hard a word."

“No! it is true.” He glanced round, perceiving no one near but Miss Valery. “Anne,” he whispered, “do you remember the parable of Nathan? Why did he do it—the cruel rich man who had enjoyed so much all his life? Why did he steal my one little ewe-lamb?”

“Stay!” cried Anne, with a sudden suspicion waking in her. “I don’t clearly understand. Tell me again.”

“Never!” And the intense pathos of his voice sank into its ancient coldness. “I have nothing to tell.—But we are wasting time. Anne, it shall be as you say.” And he drew a long hard breath. “Which of us had best write to my brother?”

Rising, he found out who had been behind him. He looked horrified.

“Agatha!—did you overhear me?”

The suspicion wounded her to the core. Her pride and sense of justice were alike roused.

“Have no fear, Mr. Harper,” said she; “I shall not betray your secrets. I do not even comprehend them; except that I think it very wicked for brothers to be such enemies.”

He made no answer.

“And,” continued Agatha, growing bolder, as she was prone to do on the side of the mysteriously wronged, “I would have sent for Major Harper myself, had not your father seemed unwilling. But the eldest son ought to be here.”

“He shall be—your husband will write,” interposed Miss Valery.

The husband moved away. He had thoroughly frozen up again into the Nathanael of old, whose coldness jarred against every ardent impulse of Agatha's temperament—rousing, irritating her into opposition.

“There is no need for him to trouble himself. What was right to be done has luckily not waited for *his* doing it. Elizabeth herself informed her brother.”

“When?”

“This afternoon. I sent the letter myself to Mr. Trenchard’s, where I knew he had been staying.”

As Mrs. Harper said this, her husband’s eyes literally glared.

“You knew where he was staying?—Agatha—Agatha?”

But Agatha’s look was fixed on the door, to which her sisters-in-law had gathered hastily. There was a talking outside—a welcome, as it seemed. She forgot everything except her sense of right and justice to one unwarrantably and unaccountably blamed.

“It is surely he,” she cried, and ran eagerly forward.

“Nathanael!”

“Frederick!”

The two brothers, elder and younger, stood confronting each other.

CHAPTER V.

“ELIZABETH sent for me—Elizabeth only showed me that kindness. Oh, it was very cruel of you all—you should have told me my father was dying.”

It must have been a hard heart that could have closed itself altogether against Frederick Harper now.

He leant against the doorway, the miserable ghost of his gay self. Born only for summer weather, on him any real blast of remorse or misfortune fell suddenly, entirely, overthrowing the whole man.

“Elizabeth says it happened yesterday; and must have been because — because

Grimes——Oh, God forgive me ! it is I that have killed my father.”

Every one shrank back. None of his sisters understood what he meant ; but the mere expression seemed to draw a line of demarcation between them and the self-convicted man. Agatha only approached him—she felt so very sorry for her old friend.

“ You must not talk in this way, Major Harper. If you did vex him in any way it is very sad ; but he will forgive you now. You cannot have done any real harm to your father.”

Her kind voice, her perfectly guileless manner, struck each of the brothers with various emotion. The eyes of both met on her face : Frederick dropped his, and groaned ; Nathanael's brightened. For the first time he addressed his brother :

“ Frederick, she is right ; you must not talk thus. Compose yourself.”

It was in vain ; his easy temperament was plunged into depths of childish weakness. " Oh, what have I done ? You said right, it would kill him to hear *that*. And my heedlessness drove Grimes to go and tell him. Yes, your prophecy was true : I have been the disgrace of our house—the destruction of my father. What shall I do, Nathanael ? ”

And he held out his hands to his younger brother in the helplessness of despair.

“ The first thing, Frederick, is for you to be silent. Anne, take my sisters away ; my brother and I have something to say to one another. What, no one will go ? Then, brother, come with me.”

The other rose mechanically ; Agatha likewise. She began to put circumstances together, and guess darkly at what was amiss. Probably she herself had to do with it. She remembered in what strict honour the old Squire held the duty of a guardian, as he had

shown in what he said about his own relation to Anne Valery. Perhaps some carelessness of his son's had caused her own loss of fortune. Yet that was not a thing to break his father's heart, or harden his brother's against him. Mere chance it must have been ; ill-luck, or, at the worst, carelessness. There could not be any real dishonour in Major Harper. And after all what was money, when they could be so much happier without it? She determined to go to her husband and openly say so, telling all that had come to her knowledge of their secrets. They should no longer be angry with one another—if it were on her account.

So she followed after them, with her soft, noiseless step ; and when the two brothers stood together in their father's deserted study, there she was between them.

“ Agatha ! ” They both uttered her name—the elder in much confusion. He had

seemed all along as though he could scarcely bear the sight of her innocent face.

“Don’t send me away,” she said, laying a hand on either. “I know I am a young ignorant thing, and you are wise men ; but perhaps a straightforward girl may be as wise as you. Why are you angry with one another ?”

Both looked uncomfortable. Major Harper tried to throw the question off.

“Are we angry with one another? Nay, I am sure——”

“Don’t deceive me—this is no time for making pretences of any kind. What is this quarrel between you two?” And she turned from one to the other her fearless eyes.

Major Harper could not meet them ; Nathanael did, calmly, but sorrowfully.

“Agatha, I cannot tell you.”

“But I can tell *you* ; and I will, for it is right. Major Harper, do not be unhappy.

Believe me, I care not one jot for all the money I ever had. If you have lost it, I am sure it was accidentally. You would not wilfully wrong me of a straw."

Again Major Harper groaned. Nathanael stood speechless with amazement. At length he said, very gently :

"How did you find this out, Agatha?"

"Mr. Grimes told me."

"Was that all he told?"

"Yes."

Major Harper looked relieved. Nathanael watched him sternly. After a while he said :

"Frederick, this is the right time to explain all. Do not start; you need not fear *me*; in any case I shall hold to my promise. But if you would explain—for my sake, for others' sake——"

The other shrank away. "No, not now," he whispered; "oh! brother, not now. Give me a little time. Don't disgrace me before her—before them all."

Nathanael's stature rose. Without again speaking, he shook his brother's hand from off his shoulder with a gesture, slight yet full of meaning, and turned towards Agatha. He seemed to yearn over her, though he checked every expression of feeling except the softness of his voice.

"I am glad you have found out we are poor—that in some things my wife may see. I have not been so cruel to her as she thought."

Agatha's cheeks crimsoned with emotion. Why—why were they not alone that she need not have smothered it down, and stood so quiet that he believed she did not feel? He went on, rather more sadly :

"But this is not a time to talk of our own affairs ; you shall know all ere long. Will you be content until then?" And he held out his hand.

She took it, looking eagerly into his face. There was something there so intrinsically

noble and true ! Though his conduct yet seemed strange—unreasonable towards her, harsh towards his brother, still, in defiance of all, there was that in his countenance which drew her upwards into faith. And there was that in her own heart, a something neither reason nor conviction, but transcending both, which leaped to him as through intervening darkness light leaps to light, and mingles there. She felt compelled to believe in her husband.

He seemed partly to understand this, and smiled—a pale faint smile, that quickly vanished.

“Now, Agatha,” he said, opening the door for her, “go and see how my father is, and then you must rest. I will sit up by him to-night. I cannot have my poor wife killing herself with watching.”

His voice sank tenderly ; he even put out his hand, as if to stroke her hair in his old fashion, but drew it back—Major Harper was

looking on. Again the dark fire, lit so fatally on his marriage-day, and since then sometimes fiercely raging, sometimes smothered down to a mere spark, yet never wholly extinguished, rose up in the young man's strong, self-contained, strangely-silent heart. Would his pride never let it burst forth, that, mingling with the common air, it might burn itself to nothingness ! But how many a whole life has been tortured and consumed by just such a little flame, a mere spark, let fall by some evil tongue "which is set on fire of hell."

While they paused—the wife waiting, she knew not for what, except that it seemed so easy to follow and so hard to quit her husband—there was a cry heard on the staircase at the foot of which they stood. Mrs. Dugdale came running down in terror.

"Nathanael — Agatha — I have told my father that Fred is here. Oh, come to him, do come !"

No time for pitiful earthly passions, jealousies, and regrets. Nathanael ran quick as lightning, his wife following. But at the door of the sick-room even she recoiled.

The old man sat up in bed, raised on pillows ; either the paralysis had not been so entire as was at first supposed, or he had slightly recovered from it. His right arm moved feebly ; his tongue was loosed, though only in a half-intelligible jabber. But his countenance showed that, however lay the miserable body, the poor old man was in his right mind. Alas ! that mind was not at peace, not lighted with the holy glow cast on the dying by the world to come. It was filled with rage and torment.

Nathanael ran to him, "Father, father, you will destroy yourself. What is it you want?"

The answer was unintelligible to his son, but Agatha gathered from it that the chamber-door was to be shut and bolted. She did

so ; yet even then the sick man's fury scarce abated. Broken words—curses that the helpless lips refused to ratify ; terrible outbursts of wrath, mingled with the piteous moan of senility. Last of all came the name, once given proudly by the young father to his first-born, and now gasped out with maledictions from the same father's dying lips—“ Frederick.”

Nathanael and Agatha looked at one another with horror. They both knew that the old Squire was bent on driving from his death-bed his own, his first-born son.

Agatha instinctively held down the palsied hands, which were trying to lift themselves towards heaven—not in prayers !

“ Father, don't say—don't even think such terrible words. Whatever he has done, forgive him !—for the love of God forgive him !”

The old man regarded her, and his excitement seemed redoubled. Agatha fancied it

was the father's pride, dreading lest she, a stranger, knew the cause of his anger.

"No, no!" she cried, "I scarcely understand anything ; my husband would not tell me. Whatever has happened can all be hushed up. We would forgive anything to a brother—oh, would we not?" And she appealed to Nathanael, who stood motionless, great drops lying on his forehead, though his features were so still.

"It is true, father," he whispered. "No one knows anything but me, and I have kept your honour safe that he might redeem it some time. Perhaps he may. And remember, he is your son—the first-born of his mother. Hush, Agatha!" Nathanael continued, as he saw a sudden change come over the old man's face. "Don't say any more now. Leave me to talk with my father."

With the grave tenderness that he always showed her, he took his wife by the hand, led her to the door, and closed it. Greatly

moved, yet feeling satisfied he would do what was right, Agatha obeyed and went downstairs.

The sisters and brother were assembled in the study. Marmaduke was there too, but took little part in the family lamentation except in keeping a perpetual tender watch over the grief of his own Harrie. Anne Valery was absent.

Frederick Harper sat apart. A sullen gloom had succeeded to his misery—with him no feeling ever lasted long, at least in the same form. Harriet and Eulalie were inspecting with great curiosity their elder brother, whose presence among his long-estranged household seemed accompanied with such a mysterious discomfort. They eyed him doubtfully, as if he had done something very wrong that nobody knew of. Mary only, who was next eldest to himself, ventured to address some kind words, and bestir herself about his comfort.

Thus the family sat, Agatha among them, for more than an hour. No one thought of going to bed. All remained together, in a strangely quiet, subdued state, Major Harper being with them all the time, though he hardly spoke, or they to him. He seemed a stranger in his father's house.

Once when he had gone for a few minutes to Elizabeth's room—he had been with Elizabeth long before his coming was known to any of the rest, it was believed—Mary began in her lengthy wandering way to tell anecdotes of his boyish doings ; how handsome he was, and how naughty too ; and how, when he got into disgrace, she, by the scheming of Elizabeth, used secretly to carry bread-and-honey and apples to his bedroom. And she wiped her eyes, the good, plain-looking sister Mary, saying over and over again, "Poor Fred !" She never thought of him, like the world, as "Major Frederick Harper," but only as "Poor Fred !"

Several times Agatha stole up-stairs to the

door of the room which enclosed the sorrow-mystery of the house. It was always shut, but she could hear Nathanael's voice within—his soft, kind voice, talking quietly by the bedside.

"I never see anything like 'un," said the coachman's wife, who sat without the door. "He do manage th' Squire just as the poor dear Missus did. He do talk just like his mother." And that was evidently the perfection of everything in the old woman's eyes.

Agatha sat down beside her on the staircase, listening to the wind without, that swept fiercely over the hollow in which Kingcombe Holm lay, as if ready to bear away on its pinions a departing soul. It was an awful night to die in. Agatha listened, sensitive to every one of its terrors. But above them all—above the shadow of coming death, fear of the future, anxiety in the present—rose one thought—the thought of her husband.

It gave her no pain—it gave her no joy—yet there it was, a visible image sitting large

and strong and calm in the half-lighted chamber of her heart, every feeling of which crept to its feet and lay there, like priestesses in the twilight before a veiled god.

Nathanael at last opened the door. He looked like one who has struggled and conquered not only with things without, but things within. His face had all the pallor, but likewise all the peace of victory. Agatha rose to meet him.

“Have you been waiting for me this long while? Good child!” And he smiled, but solemnly, as with an inward sense of the Presence which makes all things equal—softens all asperities and calms all passions. How strangely are life’s noises and contentions quelled when the silent step of Death comes into a house.

“Do you know where my brother is?” asked Nathanael.

“Down-stairs, with the rest.”

“Will you go and fetch him?”

Agatha looked up at her husband half incredulously. "Have you then succeeded? Is all made right?"

"Yes." And he smiled again.

"Oh, how good—how good you are!" She grasped his hands and kissed them, her eyes floating in tears; then, lest he should be displeased, ran quickly away.

Miss Valery met her at the stairhead, coming from the gallery where were Elizabeth's rooms. They exchanged the brief, usual question, "How is he now?" and then Agatha said:

"Be glad with me! I am sent to fetch Major Harper."

Anne pressed her hand. "Go and tell him. He is with Elizabeth."

And there Agatha found him, overcome with grief—the gay, handsome Major Harper! steadfast neither in good nor evil. He sat, his head bent, his hair falling disordered, its greyness showing, oh! so plain. Plainer still

were the wrinkles which a life of smiles had carved only the deeper round the mouth—token of how near upon him was creeping a desolate, unhonoured age. By his side, talking softly, with his hand in hers, lay the crippled sister, perhaps the only living creature who really loved him.

“Major Harper,” Agatha spoke softly, laying her hand upon his shoulder. The poor broken down man, dropping into old age! there was no fear of his thinking she was in love with him now.

“Well, what do you want?”

“I am sent to fetch you to your father.”

He looked incredulous;—Agatha repeated her message.

“My husband sent me. Your father wishes very much to see you. Come.”

“Elizabeth!” He turned to her as if she could make him understand this incomprehensible news.

Elizabeth clasped his hand and loosed it.

She said nothing, but Agatha saw she was weeping for joy. Her brother rose and went.

Through the long gallery they passed, his sister-in-law carrying the light, and leading him. He had quite forgotten his courteous manners now. Agatha thought of the days in London—when he had escorted her to operas, and murmured over her in drawing-rooms, making her so happy and honoured in his notice. Poor Major Harper! How vain were all the shows of his brilliant life, the men that had courted him, the women that had flattered and admired him! Agatha forgave him all his follies—ay, even all the hearts he had broken. There was not one of those poor hearts, not one, on which he could rest his tired head now!

At the door of their father's room Nathanael met him, a new and more righteous Jacob dealing with a more desolate Esau.

And like Esau's was the cry that broke from Frederick Harper as he went in and flung himself on his knees by the bed.

"Bless me—even me also—O my father."

There was no answer. The words of forgiveness were denied his hearing. The old Squire could but look at his son, and move his lips in an inarticulate murmur.

Agatha ran to Major Harper's side. It was pitiful to see the shock he had received, and the frenzied way in which he called upon his father to speak—if only one word.

"He cannot speak, you know, but he does indeed forgive you. Be sure that he forgives you!"

Her husband drew her away to the little curtained alcove which had been Mrs. Harper's dressing-room. There they stood, close together—for Nathanael did not let her go, and she clung to him in tears—while the father and son had their reconciliation.

It was silent throughout, for after the first burst, Major Harper was not heard to speak. Now and then came a sound like the smothered sob of a boy. No one saw the faces of father and son ; they were bent together, just as when, years upon years ago, the proud father had sometimes condescended to let his baby son, his first-born and heir, go to sleep upon his shoulder.

Thus, after many minutes, Nathanael found them lying.

He held the curtain aside to see his father's countenance ; it was very peaceful now, though with a dimness gathering in the open eyes. Agatha had never before seen that look—the unmistakeable shadow of death. She shrank back, trembling violently. Her husband put his arm round her.

“Do not be afraid, my child,” he whispered, using the old word and tone. She rested on him, and was quieted.

“ I think we had better call them all in now.”

“ Shall I fetch them ?” said his wife, and went out, flitting once more through the still, ghostly house. But she thought of her husband, of his last word and look, and had no fear.

They came in, all that were now living of the old man's children—save one—the poor Elizabeth. They stood round the bed, a full circle, his two sons, his three daughters, his son-in-law and daughter-in-law, and lastly Anne Valery. She was the palest and most serene of all.

Thus for an hour or more they waited—so slow was the last closing of the long-drawn-out-life. There was no pain or struggle ; merely the ebbing away of breath. The palsied hands, white and beautiful to the last, lay smooth on the counterpane ; and when occasionally one or other of his daughters knelt down and kissed him, the

old man dimly smiled. But whenever he opened his eyes, they travelled no further than to the face of his eldest son—rested there, brightened and closed.

And thus, lying quietly in the midst of his children, at daybreak the old Squire died.

CHAPTER VI.

THE old man was gathered to his fathers.

It was the day after that on which he had been borne to the place appointed for all living. A new coffin rested beside that of Catherine Harper in the family vault ; the portrait still smiled, but on an empty bed. There was no separation now.

At Kingcombe Holm the house had awakened from its sleep of mourning ; the shutters were opened, and the sunshine came in familiarly on the familiar rooms—where was missed the presence of him who had abided there for threescore years and ten. But what were they ? Counted only as

“labour and sorrow”—they had all passed away, and he was gone.

The family met—a large table circle. They looked melancholy, all in their weeds, but otherwise were as usual. A certain gravity and under-toned speech alone remained. Mary had again begun to busy herself over her housekeeping; and Eulalie, looking prettier than ever in her black dress, was listening with satisfaction to the Reverend Mr. Thorpe, a worthy, simple young man, who had come at once to pay to the family of his affianced the respect of attending the funeral, and to plan another ceremony, when the decent term of mourning should be expired.

Major Harper, now recovering something of his old elasticity of manner, took the place at the foot of the breakfast-table, whence Mary, presiding as usual, cast over to him glances sometimes of pride, sometimes of doubtful curiosity, as if speculating

on what sort of a ruler the future head of the house would be.

A very courteous and graceful one, most surely!—to judge by the way in which he was doing the agreeable to his sister-in-law. Quite harmlessly, only it seemed as necessary for Major Harper to warm himself in the fair looks of some woman or other, as for a drenched butterfly to dry its wings in the sunshine. He was indeed a poor helpless human butterfly, not made for cloudy weather, storm, or night!

But he fluttered in vain; Agatha took no notice of him whatsoever. Her whole nature had deepened down to other things—things far beneath the shallow ken of Major Harper.

During this week, when the numerous duties of the brothers of the family left its womenkind nearly alone, shut up in the house of mourning, with nothing outwardly to do or to think of beyond the fold of crape

on a gown or the make of a bonnet—Agatha had learnt strange secrets. They were not of Death, but of Love.

She had seen very little of her husband. Either by necessity or design, he had been almost constantly away; at Thornhurst, arranging business for Miss Valery, who had gone home; sometimes at Kingcombe, in his own house—his lonely house; and for two days and nights, to the astonishment and slight scandal of his sisters, he had been absent in Cornwall. But wherever he was, or whatever he had to do, he either saw or wrote to his wife every day; kind, grave words, or kinder letters; brother-like in their wisdom and tenderness—just the sort of tenderness that he seemed to believe she would wish for from him.

Agatha accepted all—these brief meetings—these constant letters; saw the wounding curiosity of his sisters relax, and even Harriet Dugdale acknowledge how mistaken

had been her former notions, and on what excellent terms her brother and his wife now evidently were; she really never thought Nathanael would have made such an attentive, affectionate husband! And Agatha smiled outwardly a proud satisfied smile; while inwardly—oh, what a crushed, remorseful, passionate heart was there!

A heart which now began to know itself—at once its fulness and its cravings. A heart thirsting for that love, wanting which marriage is but as a dead corrupting body without the soul—love, the true life-union, consisting of oneness of spirit, sympathy, thought, and will—love which would have been the same had they lived twenty thousand miles apart, ay, had they never married at all, but waited until eternity commingled those whom no earthly destinies could altogether put asunder. Now out of her own soul she learnt—what not one human being in a million learns, and yet the truth

remains the same—the unity, the immortality, the divineness of Love, to which the One Immortal Divine gave His own name.

She sat in her usual quiet fashion, she did everything in such a quiet, self-contained fashion now—sat, idly talked to by Major Harper, whom she did not hear at all. She only heard, at the further end of the table, Nathanael talking to Mary. Sometimes she stole a glance, and thought how cordial his manner to his sister was, and how tender his eyes could look at times. And she sighed. At her sigh, her husband would turn, see her listening to Frederick with that absent down-cast look—and become silent.

Not an angry jealous silence now—his whole manner showed how much he honoured and trusted his wife—but the hush of a deep abiding pain, a sense of loss which nothing could ever reveal or remove.

But men must keep up worldly duties ; it is only women, and not all of these, who can

afford the luxury of a broken heart. Mr. Harper rose, nerved for the day's task—a painful one, as all the family knew. The elder brother had shrunk from it, and it had been left to Nathanael, who in all things was now the thinker and the doer. The impression of this had fixed itself outwardly, effacing the last remnant of his boyish looks. As he stood leaning over Mary, Agatha thought he had already the worn aspect of middle age.

“It will not take me long, Mary, since you say my father kept his papers in such order. Probably I shall have done by the time the Dugdales come. You are quite sure there was a will?”

“Quite sure ; you will probably find it in the cabinet. I saw him looking there the very afternoon of the day he died. I was calling him to dinner, but his back was turned, and I could not make him understand—poor father !”

Mary's eyes filled, but the younger brother

said a few kind words, and her trouble softened. The rest were silent and serious, until Nathanael, going away, addressed Frederick rather formally. All the speech between them, though smooth, was invariably formal and rare.

“You are satisfied to leave this duty in my hands?—you do not wish to share it?”

“Oh, no, no!” hurriedly answered the other, walking away in the sunny window-seat, and breathing its freshness eagerly, as if to drive away the bare thought of death and the grave.

Nathanael went out—but ere he had closed the door a little hand touched him.

“What did you want, Agatha?”

“I should like to go with you, if you would allow—that is, if you would not forbid me.”

“Forbid you? Nay! But——”

“I want—not to interrupt you, or share any family secrets—but just to sit near you in the

room. 'This is such a strange, dreary house now !' And she shivered.

Her husband sighed. " Poor child—such a child to be in the midst of us and our trouble ! Come with me, if you will." And he took her into the study.

No one had been there since the father died ; directly afterwards some careful hand had locked the door, and brought the key to Nathanael ; and it was the only room in the house whose window, undarkened, had met during all that week the eye of day. It felt close with sunshine and want of air. Mr. Harper opened the casement, and placed an arm-chair beside it, where Agatha might look out on the chrysanthemum bed, and the tall evergreen, where a robin sat singing. He pointed them both to her, as if to fortify her with a sense of life and cheerfulness, and then sat down to the gloomy task of looking over his father's papers.

They were very few—at least those left

open in the desk ; merely accounts of the estate, kept with brevity and with much apparent labour ; sixty years ago literature, nay, education, were at a low ebb among English country gentlemen. But all the papers were so carefully arranged, that Nathanael had nothing to do but to glance over them and tie them up—simple yearly records of the just life and honest dealings of a good man, who transferred unencumbered to his children the trust left by his ancestors.

“I think,” said Nathanael—breaking the dreary silence—“I think there never was one of the Harper line who lived a long life so stainlessly, so honourably, as my father.”

And somehow, as he tied up the packets, his fingers slightly trembled. Agatha came and stood by him.

“Let me help you ; I have ready hands.”

“But why should I make use of them?”

“Have you not a right?” she said, half smiling.

"Nay, I never claim as a right anything which is not freely given."

"But I give it. It pleases me to help you," said Agatha, in a low tone, afraid of her own voice. She took the papers from him, and tried to make herself busy, in her innocent way. It cheered her.

Nathanael watched her for a minute. "You are very neat-handed, Agatha, and it is kind of you to help me."

"Oh, I would help any one." Foolish, thoughtless words! He said no more, but went and looked over the cabinet.

This was a sadder duty. There were letters extending over more than a half-century. The Squire received so few that he seemed never to have burnt one. The oldest—fifty years old—were love-letters, of the time when people wrote love-letters beginning "Honoured Miss," and "Dear and respected Sir," overlaying the plain heart-truth with no sentimentalisms of the pen. The signa-

tures, "Catherine Grey," and "Nathanael Harper," in round, formal, girl and boy hand, told how young they were when this correspondence began ;—young still, when its sudden ceasing showed that courtship had become marriage. From that time, for nearly twenty years, there was scarcely a letter signed Catherine Harper.

"This looks," said Agatha, who unconsciously to both had come to stand by her husband and share in his task—"this looks as if they were so rarely parted that they had no need for letter-writing."

"It was so: I believe my father and mother lived very happily together."

"I should like to read these letters, if I might? They are the only love-letters I ever saw."

"Are they, indeed?"

The sharp questioning look startled Agatha. She remembered that first letter of Nathanael's

—perhaps he was vexed that she had apparently forgotten it—the letter which had been such a solemn epoch in her young life. She coloured vividly and painfully.

“ I mean—that is——”

Her husband looked another way. But when he spoke, it was with perfect kindness. “ You shall have these letters if you so much desire it.”

“ Thank you. I would like to keep something of your mother's. And she was indeed so happy in her marriage ?”

“ Very happy, Anne Valery says. My father was not a perfect temper, but she understood him thoroughly, and he trusted her. He had need ; he knew—what is a rare thing in marriage now-a-days—that he had been his wife's first love.”

Agatha made no reply, and the conversation dropped into silence.

Next to Mrs. Harper's letters, and pre-

served with almost equal care, was another packet. It began with a child's scrawl—double-lined, upright, and stiff:

“MY DEAR FATHER,

“Uncle Brian has ruled me this paper, and ruled Anne another. We are all very merry at Weymouth. We don't want to come home, except to see”—(here a word, apparently “*ponies*,” had been carefully altered, by a more delicate hand, into something like “*Papa* ”)—“Anne's love, and everybody's, from your dutiful son,

“FREDERICK.”

“ ‘*Frederick* ?’—I thought the letter was yours.”

“No, if he had kept any it was sure to be my brother's. Frederick must have them back.”

“Let me tie them up,” said Agatha, stretching out her hand.

“No—no—are they so very precious ?

Why do you want to touch them?" said he, sharply, drawing them out of her reach.

"Only that I might help you."

Mr. Harper regarded her a moment, and then put back the letters into her lap. "Forgive me, I did not mean to be cross with you. But this task confuses me."

He leaned his elbow on the cabinet, covering his eyes, and stood thus for two or three minutes. Agatha remained silent—who could have intruded on the emotion of a son at such a time? None but a wife who could have stolen into his heart with a closer, dearer claim, and she, alas! *she* dared not. Weeks ago—when she believed herself wronged—it would have been far easier. The higher he rose, the lower she sank, weighed down by the bitter humility that always comes with fervent love. She watched him—her heart throbbing, bursting, yearning to cast itself at his feet—yet she dared not.

"Now let us look over some other letters.

I wonder whether Mary was right, and it is here we shall find the will !”

He, then, was only thinking of letters and wills ! Agatha's lip half curled, half quivered. She turned away, and went to sit by the window and watch the chrysanthemums.

At last she was attracted back by her husband's voice.

“ This is the will, I see, by the endorsement. Take it, Agatha ; we will not touch it till the Dugdales come. And here are more letters to my father. Do you think I ought to burn them or look them over first ?”

The confidential tone in which he spoke soothed Agatha. It was a sort of tacit acknowledgment of her wifely rights to his trust.

“ I think, suppose you looked them over——”

“ I cannot,” said he, wearily. “ Will you ?” And he gave her a handful in her lap. Agatha felt pleased ; she thanked him, and turned them over one by one.

"Here is a hand which looks like Miss Valery's."

"It is hers. Set them by."

She opened another, in a careless and very illegible hand, which she could not recognise at all :

"MY DEAR BROTHER,

"The approaching marriage in your family, of which you inform me, unfortunately cannot alter my plans. I must recover my lost fortunes abroad.

"Frederick told me yesterday his certainty of being accepted by Miss Valery. He might have told me sooner, but perhaps thought me too much of a crusty old bachelor to sympathise with his felicity. Possibly I am.

"You ask if Anne has communicated to me the coming change in her life? No.

"Farewell, brother, and God bless you and yours.

"B. L. H."

"Why, this is Uncle Brian!" cried Agatha, giving the letter to her husband. He read it, laid it aside without comment, and sat thinking. She did the same. Turning, their eyes met; and they understood each other's thoughts, but apparently neither liked to speak. At last Nathanael said :

"It must have been so, though I never guessed before."

"But I did, though she never openly told me."

"Well, it is a strange world!" mused the young man. "Poor Uncle Brian."

"When do you expect him home?"

"Any day, every day. Thank God!"

"Did you not think she seemed a little better yesterday," said Agatha, hesitatingly.

"Just a very little, you know."

"A little better; is she ill? What, very ill?"—Agatha's mute answer was enough.

"Oh, poor, poor Anne! And he is coming home!"

"Perhaps," said Agatha, shocked to see her husband's emotion—"perhaps if we take great care, and she is very happy,—people must live when they are happy——"

"Few would live at all then," was the answer, unwontedly bitter. "Better not—better not; poor Anne! It is a hard, cruel, miserable world."

"Why do you say that, Nathanael?"

He started, and Agatha too, for opening the door, with a bright, clear look, was she of whom they were just talking—Anne Valery.

"I knew I might come in. I heard what you were doing here," and a slight sadness crossed her face. "Is it all done, now?"

"Nearly," and Mrs. Harper hurriedly folded the letter, which lay still on her lap. Miss Valery's eye caught the writing; Nathanael gave it to her.

Anne read it: at first with a natural womanly feeling—nay, even agitation. Soon

this ceased, absorbed in the infinite peace and content of her whole mien. "I knew all," she said calmly. "It was a—a mistake of Frederick's."—Then, still calmly: "What do you think I have just heard from Marmaduke?—*He*"—there could be but one she meant—"he has safely landed at Havre."

"Uncle Brian!" the young people both cried, and then instinctively repressed the joy. It seemed too sacred to be expressed in ordinary fashion. And passing naturally from one thought to another, Nathanael glanced round the room; the unused desk, the scattered papers left to be examined by the unfamiliar hands of a younger generation. Had the absent one come but a little sooner! "Alas!" he said, "it seems as if the world's universal sorrow lay in those words, '*Too late.*'"

Miss Valery sunk on a chair, the temporary strength and brightness ebbing from her.

Her hands dropped into that fold that was peculiar and habitual to them—a simple attitude, not unlike Chantrey's "Resignation."

"You speak truly, Nathanael. But 'our times are in *His* hand.'"

She said no more, and shortly Mr. Harper, taking with him the sealed packet that was endorsed "*My Will*," led the way to where the family were assembled. In doing so, there grew over him the hard silence always visible when he was much affected. But Agatha was not surprised or hurt ; she began to understand him now.

In the dining-room were only the immediate family. Every one knew the probable purport of the will, and how simple a document it was likely to be, for the patriarchal old Squire hated the very mention of law, and it had been his pride that, though not entailed, the inheritance of Kingcombe Holm had descended for centuries unbroken by a single legal squabble. Therefore they

all waited indifferently, merely to go through a necessary form ; Harriet Dugdale and her husband, Eulalie and her *fiancé*, and the solitary Mary. Major Harper alone was rather restless, especially when the three others came in from the study. It was noticeable, that with all his smooth manner Frederick never seemed quite at ease in the presence of Miss Valery. Nevertheless he tried, and successfully, to assume his position as elder brother and present head of the family. He gave Anne a gracious welcome.

“ I scarcely expected you would have honoured us so far. This is entirely a family meeting.”

“ Shall I leave ?”

“ Oh, no,” cried everybody at once, “ Anne is so thoroughly one of the family.”

“ Certainly,” responded Major Harper, bowing, though his brows were knit. He waited till Anne took her seat, and then sat down, silent. Many changes, vivid and

various, passed like clouds over his flexible mouth. At last, leaning forward, he hid it with his hand. There was a brief hush: in the men, of solemnity—in the women, of mourning. More than one tear splashed on the black dress of the tender-hearted Mary.

Nathanael stood—the will in his hand—hesitating.

“It seems to me, that as this is a family meeting, we might—not necessarily, but still out of kindness and respect—postpone it for a few days, that the only remaining member of the family may be present.”

“Who is that?” said the elder brother.

“Uncle Brian.”

One or two voices, especially the Dugdales', seconded this, and eagerly proposed to wait for Uncle Brian.

“Impossible!” Major Harper said, hastily. “I have engagements. I cannot wait for any one.”

“ But——”

“ Nathanael—don't argue. Remember, I am the elder brother. Give me my father's will.” Nathanael paused a moment, and gave it. “ The seal has been broken and re-fastened,” Frederick added, breaking it with rather nervous hands. He tried to glance over it, but his eyes wandered unsteadily. “ There, take it and read. I hate business.”

And he threw himself back in his seat, which happened to be the old Squire's especial chair. Agatha thought it was thoughtless of him to use it.

Nathanael read the will aloud. It was dated ten years back, and was in the Squire's own hand, drawn up simply, but with perfect clearness. The division of fortune was as they all expected: a moderate funded sum to each of the daughters and to Nathanael; the estate, with all real and personal pro-

perty, to go to the eldest son. There were a few small bequests to servants, and one gift, of the late Mrs. Harper's jewels.

"I meant them," the old man wrote, "for my eldest son's wife. Disappointed in this, I leave them to Anne Valery."

Major Harper moved restlessly in his chair. Anne sat quiet. The young Agatha looked at them, and wondered if people grew callous as they grew old.

"Is it all read?" said Frederick.

"Yes. Stay, here are a few lines; a codicil, I fancy, affixed with seals to the body of the will. I can hardly make it out."

And as Mr. Harper perused it, his wife observed his countenance change. He let the paper drop, and sat silent.

"What is it? Read," cried Harrie Dugdale.

"I cannot—Anne, will you? God knows, brothers and sisters"—and he looked all

round the circle with an eagerly appealing gaze—"God knows I never knew or dreamed of this. Anne, read."

"Shall I read, Major Harper?"

He was gazing out of the window with an absent air. At the sound of her voice he started, and gave some mechanical assent.

Anne read the date—of only twelve days back.

"That was the very day that he was taken ill, you know," whispered Mary.

The codicil began :

"I, Nathanael Harper, being in sound mind and body, do hereby make my last will and testament, utterly revoking all others, in so far as relates to my two sons. I leave to my younger son, Nathanael Locke Harper, all my landed, real, and personal estate, praying that he may long live and maintain our name in honour at Kingcombe Holm. To my eldest son—having no desire to expose to ruin the family estate, or link the

family name with more dishonour than it already bears—to my eldest son, Frederick Harper, I leave the sum of One Shilling.”

Anne's reading ceased. Dead silence, utter, frightened silence, followed. Then arose a chorus of women's voices—“Oh, Frederick!—oh, Frederick!”

Frederick rose, feebly smiling. “It is a mistake—all a mistake. My father was not in his right mind.”

The sisterly tide turned. “Oh, hush, Frederick! How wicked of you to say so!”

“We'll read it over again,” said Marmaduke Dugdale, waking up into the interests of the world around him. Anne gave him the paper, and he read it with his ponderous, manly voice, rounding out every bitter word which Anne had softened down. All was undoubtedly legal, signed in his own hand, and witnessed by two of his servants. There could be no doubt it was done immediately before the paralytic attack, when he was

perfectly in his senses; indeed, he could not be said ever to have lost them.

The family sat, awed by their father's deed; to question which never struck them for a moment—legal chicanery was not rife at Kingcombe Holm. They looked at the disinherited brother with a sort of shrinking wonder, as if he had done some great unknown wickedness. He might have sat there ever so long, conscience-stricken and stupified, but this family gaze stung him into violence.

“I say it is a cheat—how or by whom contrived I know not—but it is a cheat. My father loved me—the only one of you who ever did. If there was a coolness between us, he forgave me when he died. You all saw that.”

There was no denying it. Every one remembered how the father's last dying look of love had been on his eldest son. Again the tide of family feeling changed. They threw

doubtful glances towards Nathanael ; even his own wife. But when she saw his countenance, she drew closer to him, and trembled and doubted no more.

He stood, meeting the eyes of all his family. In his aspect was great distress, but entire composure—not a shadow of hesitation or confusion. Nor, on the other hand, was there any triumph. When he spoke—they seemed expecting him to speak—his voice was low and steady :

“ You know, brother, and all the rest of you know, that I have had no hand in this matter.”

“ I know nothing of the sort,” cried Frederick. “ I only know that I have been defrauded—disgraced.—Not by any act of my father’s, or he would not lie quiet in his grave. My father always loved me.” And the quick feeling natural to Major Harper made him hesitate—unable to proceed. But soon he continued, vehemently :

“I will find out this. Evil speakers, malicious, underhand hypocrites, have turned my father against me. I declare to Heaven that I never wronged any——”

Frederick stopped — interrupted not by words, for there was perfect silence—but by a certain quiet look of Anne Valery's, which crept up through her dropped eyelids and fastened on his face. He turned crimson—he had so much of the woman in him, though of womanhood in its weakest form. He glanced from Miss Valery to Agatha, and then back again.

“Anne—Anne Valery, tell me do you know anything?”

“Everything.”

“You—even you!” For the moment, he cowered in such emotion as was pitiful to see; but it passed, and he grew desperate.

“I say, I will contest this will. It shall be proved invalid. My lawyer Grimes——”

"Mr. Grimes has been here, and is now gone to America," Anne whispered. "I urged and assisted him to go, that he should not throw disgrace on the family."

Again Frederick cowered down, then rose, goaded to the last degree. "Nevertheless, this will shall not stand. I will throw it into Chancery. I will leave for London this very day."

"Stay," said Nathanael, starting from deep thought, and intercepting him as he was quitting the room. "One word, Frederick."

"Not one! You are all against me, but I will brave you all. I will have my rights—ay, even if I plead my father's insanity."

"Oh, horrible!" cried his sisters.

"Frederick, you know that to be impossible," said Nathanael, sternly.

"Then I will plead what may prove a deeper disgrace to the family than madness, or even—what I am supposed to have done,"

catching his brother's arm, and hissing out the words in his face—"I will plead that the will is *a forgery*."

Nathanael wrenched away his hold, thereby throwing Frederick back almost to the floor. The two stood for a moment glaring at one another, in that deadly animosity, most deadly when it arises between brothers,—and then the younger recovered himself. It might be because, instantaneously as the struggle had begun and ended, he had heard a woman's cry of terror, and the name uttered was not "Frederick," but "Nathanael." Also, as he stood, he felt two little hands steal from behind and tighten over his own. He grew very calm then.

"Frederick, you must unsay that word. There are some things which a man cannot bear even from his brother. No doubt can exist that this is my father's own writing, and no forgery. You know that as well as I do."

"As well as you do! Exactly what I meant to observe," said Major Harper, with his keenest and politest sneer.

Nathanael moved back. A man's roused passions are always terrible; but there is something ten times more awful in fury that is altogether calm—molten down as it were to a white heat. Never but once—that uneffaceable *once*—had Agatha seen her husband look as he looked now.

"Pause one minute, Frederick. If you had waited and heard me speak——"

"I dare you to speak!"

"It would be better not to dare me. I am at my last ebb of patience. I have kept faithfully my promise to you. None of our family know—not even my own wife—all that is known by you and me and our father whom we buried yesterday. I would have saved him from the knowledge if I could, but it was not to be. Now, take care. If you drive me to it——"

He hesitated. Agatha felt his hand—the thin boyish hand—grow cold as ice and rigid as iron. She uttered a faint cry.

“Agatha, my wife,” with the old sweetness in the whisper, “go and sit down. Leave me to reason with my brother.”

“No, let *me* do that,” said one, coming between. It was Anne Valery.

She had risen from the chair where, during almost all this time, she had sat like a statue, only none watched her, not even Agatha. When she rose, it was with a motion so slow and gliding, her soft black dress scarcely rustling as she moved, that Frederick Harper might well start, thinking a supernatural touch was on his arm.

“Anne, is it you? I had forgotten you. No”—he muttered, half to himself, turning from the contest with his brother to gaze on her—“no, I never did—never do forget you.”

"I believe that. Come and speak to me, here."

Unresisted, she put her arm in his, and led him away to the deep bay-window, circled with a low cushioned sill, such as delights children. Anne sat down.

"Are you determined on this cruel course?"

"I must recover my rights," was the sullen answer. "Any man would."

"And when you have done this—supposing it practicable—what further do you purpose?"

"What further?" He looked puzzled, but at last perceived her meaning. With an impulse eagerly caught, as Major Harper caught all impulses, good and ill, he cried—"Yes, I understand you. My first act, on coming to my property, shall be to right poor Agatha."

"I thought so," said Anne, kindly. "But you will not be able. There are others

whose claims will be upon you the instant you have money to satisfy them—the shareholders. They know nothing of Agatha Bowen. Remember, you expended her fortune as you worked the mine—in *your own name*.”

Major Harper looked confounded with shame. “And you knew all this, Anne—you! For how long?”

“For some months—ever since I bought Wheal Caroline.”

“And you never betrayed me!”

“We were playfellows, Frederick.” She spoke softly, and turned her face to the other side of the bay-window.

He forgot she was old now—he remembered only the familiar voice and attitude, the same as when in her girlish days she used to sit on the cushioned window-sill and talk with him for hours.

“Playfellows! Was that all, Anne? Only playfellows?”

“Only playfellows,” she repeated firmly. “Never anything more. You knew that always.” And, perhaps unconsciously, Anne looked down on a ring—plain, not unlike a childish keepsake—which she always wore on the wedding-finger of her left hand.

Major Harper sighed ; not one of his sentimental sighs, but one from the deeps of his heart. A smile, hollow and sad, followed it. “I suppose it is idle talking now, but—but—you were my first-love, Anne ! If things had gone differently, I might have been a different man.”

“Not so. God ordained your fate, not I. No man need be ruined for life because a woman cannot love him. Human beings hang not on one another in that blind way. We have each an individual soul ; on another soul may rest all its hopes and joys, but on God only rests its worth, its duties, and its nobility. We may live to do His work, and rejoice therein, long after we have for-

gotten the very sound of that idle word—happiness.”

She paused.

“Go on ; you talk as you always used to do.”

“Not quite,” said Anne, with a faint smile ; “I am hardly strong enough. Frederick,” and her eyes had their former lovely, earnest look—earnest almost to tears, save that girl-tears had from them long been dried, —“Frederick, for the sake of our olden days—of your mother whom we both loved—of your father who is gone to her—listen to me for a little. Trust to your brother—he will not act unjustly. Do not create dissensions in your family ; do not let people say that the moment Mr. Harper’s head was laid in the grave his children quarrelled over his property.”

“I do not quarrel—I but take my right,” cried Major Harper, becoming again the

“man of the world,” as he saw the curious glances that from time to time reached the bay-window. “Thank you for this good advice ; for which my brother owes you even more than I. But I am not a child now, nor a boy in love, to be talked over by a woman.”

Miss Valery rose, rather proudly. “Nor am I that woman, Major Harper. But I have been so long united in affection with your family ; I could not bear to think it would be brought to dishonour. Surely—surely *you* will not be the one to do it ?”

Again, as he turned to go, she drew him back by those earnest eyes.

“Frederick, it would grieve me so, ay, break my heart, to see them brought into open shame,—the old familiar home, and the name—the dear, dear name.”

Major Harper's bitter tongue burst its control and stung. “I now see your motive. Everybody knows how very dearly Anne

Valery has all her life loved the Harper name."

Anne rose to her full height, and a blush, vivid as a girl's, dyed her cheek. "I have," she said—"I have loved it, and I am not ashamed."

The blush paled—she sank back on the window-sill. Major Harper was alarmed.

"Anne—how ill you look! What have I done to you?"

"Nothing," she answered; and catching his arm drew herself upright once more.

"Frederick, we were children together, and you loved me; some day you will remember that. Afterwards, we grew up young people, and, still thinking you loved me—but it was only vanity then—you did me a great wrong; I will not say how, or when, or why, and no one knows the fact save me—but you did it. You did the same wrong to another lately."

"How—how?"

“ You said to Mrs. Thornycroft—you see I have learnt all, for I wrote and asked her—you said that you ‘feared’ poor little Agatha loved you, and——”

“ I know—I know.”

“ You know, too, that vain thoughts misled you ; that it was not true. But it was a wicked thing to say ; trifling with a woman’s honour—torturing those who loved her—bringing on her worlds of suffering. Still, she is young, and her suffering may end in joy ;—mine——”

Anne paused ; the human nature struggled hard within her breast—she was not quite old yet. At length it calmed down—that last anguished cry of the soul against its appointed destiny.

She took her old playmate by the hand, saying gently,

“ I am going away soon—going *home*. Before I go, I would like to say, as I used to do when you were unkind to me as a

child, 'Good-night, and I forgive Fred everything.' "

" Oh, Anne—Anne." He kissed her hand in strong emotion.

" Hush ! I cannot talk more," she went on quickly. " You will do as I ask ? You will wait until—until——"

She stopped speaking, and put her handkerchief to her lips. Slowly, slowly, red drops shone through its white folds. Major Harper called wildly for his sisters.

" I knew how it would be," cried Mary Harper. " It has happened twice before, and Doctor Mason said if it happened again——"

" Oh, God forgive me!" groaned Frederick, as his brother carried Anne Valery away. " She will die—and I shall have killed her !"

CHAPTER VII.

ANNE VALERY did not die. Agatha had said she would not ; and the young heart's creed was true. It had its foundation in a higher law than that of physical suffering.

After a few days she was able to be moved to her own house, according to her earnest desire ; after a few more, the energy of her mind seemed to put miraculous strength into her feeble body.

" I knew you would get well," said Agatha joyfully, as she watched her patient returning to ordinary household ways ; only lying down a little more than Anne was used to do, and speaking seldom and low always, for fear of

the bleeding at the lungs. "I knew you must get well, but I never saw anybody get well so fast as you."

"I had need," Anne answered. "I have so much to do."

"That you always have. What a busy rich life—rich in the best sense—yours has been! How unlike mine!"

"I hope so—in many things," said Anne, to herself. "But I must not speak much. I talked my last talk with poor Frederick in the bay-window. Where is Frederick?"

"He has been riding up and down the country day after day—he seems to find no rest."

Anne looked sorry. "And we are so quiet here!"

It was indeed very quiet, that sombre house at Thornhurst, through whose wintry rooms no one wandered but Agatha, excepting the old, attached servants. Yet this was of her own will. She had been jealous that

any one should attempt to nurse Anne but herself. She left even her own home to do it. Yet—the bitter thought followed her ever—this last was small renunciation. No one would miss her there!

During the days when Miss Valery lay ill, the world without had been shut from Agatha's view. Woman-like, she lived within the four walls and beside the sick couch, and had only seen her husband for a few minutes each day, when, though he talked to her only of Anne, his manner had a soft, reverent tenderness, and a troubled humility, as if he began to see a different image in his young wife. She was different, and he too. Neither knew how or when the change came—but it was there.

She did so miss him, when, having taken them safe to Thornhurst, and told her "that she might stay there as long as Anne needed her, but no longer"—ah, that happy "but!"—he went away to his own little house at

Kingcombe, and busied himself there for three days.

“Do you think Nathanael will come and see us this morning?” said Anne, looking up from the papers with which she was occupied, towards Agatha, who stood at the window watching down the road.

“Did you want my husband?”

“Oh, no! I can do my business myself now. But I think he will come.”

“Why do you think so?”

“Why?—Child, come here.” And as Agatha knelt by the sofa, Miss Valery leaned over her, twisting her curls and stroking down the lids over her brown eyes in the babyish, fondling ways which all good people can condescend to at times, especially when recovering from sickness.

“She is a foolish child! Did she fancy nobody loved her? Did she think everybody believed she was wicked (and so she was, now and then, very wicked). Does

she suppose nobody sees her poor little goodnesses? Oh, but they do! They will find all out without my telling. It is best to leave things alone."

"You must not speak; it will do you harm."

"Not thus whispering. Nay, lay the head down again. Imagine it only a little bird in the air talking to my child. Some kind of characters—I once knew the like well!"—and Anne's whisper came through a half sigh—"are very proud and jealous over the thing they love. They cannot bear a breath to rest on it, or to go from it to any other than themselves. They are very silent, too; would die rather than complain. They are strong-willed and secret—you might as well attempt to cleave with your little hand to the heart of a great oak. You must shine over it, and rain softly on it, and cling close round it, and it will take you into its arms, and support you safe, and hang you all round with beautiful

leaves. But you must always remember that it is a noble forest-oak, and that you are only its dews, or its sunshine, or its ivy garland. You never must attempt to come between it and the skies."

Anne ceased. Agatha looked up with moistened eyelids.

"I understand ; I will try—if you will stay with me. I cannot do anything right without you."

Anne smiled. "Poor little Agatha ! Not even with the help of her husband ?"

"My husband ! Oh, teach me to be a good wife, such a wife as you would have been—as you may be——"

Agatha felt a soft finger closing her lips, and knew that on *that* subject there must still be, as ever, total silence. She hid her face, and obeyed.

At length Miss Valery started. "There is a horse coming down the road, I think. Go, look. It may be your husband."

Agatha rose, and ran to the window.

Anne half rose too. "I fancy I hear two horses. Is anybody with Nathanael?"

"Only Mr. Dugdale.

"Ah! well!" There was the slightest possible compression of eyelids and mouth, and Anne sat in her place again. "It is very kind of Marmaduke."

The visitors came in softly. Duke Dugdale was the kindest, gentlest soul to any one that was ill—wise as a doctor, merry as a child. But now—though he strove to hide it—his countenance was overcast.

"It's no use, Anne," he said, after a brief greeting, during which he felt her pulse in quite a professional way, and pronounced it "stronger—much stronger—and too quick almost."

"What is of no use?"

"Brian Harper won't come home! All his abominable, con——yes, I'll out with it—his confounded pride." And Duke tried to look very savage, but couldn't manage it.

“Where is he?”

“Somewhere near Havre; we can't make out where. He will not write. Ask Nathanael.”

“I am afraid it is too true,” said Nathanael, leaving his wife, to whom he had been talking by the window. “I shall have to hunt him out, and use all my persuasions before he will come home; because he is too proud to return poor as he went out. What shall I say to him, Anne? I shall start to-morrow.”

Agatha turned quickly round. Her husband did not see her anxious look—he was watching Miss Valery.

“Tell him, Nathanael, that his brother is dead, and his presence needed in the family. Once make him understand that it is right to come, and he will. No one was ever more able to do or to suffer *for the right*, than Brian Harper.”

Marmaduke shook her hand heartily.

“Anne, you are as wise as a man, and as faithful as a woman. If poor Brian were going to be hanged for murder, I do believe his old friend would find a good word to say for him !”

“Well,” said Nathanael, after a silence, “I shall go to Havre to-morrow. You can spare me, Anne? And for my wife——”

Agatha hung her head. A vague dread smote her. She would have given worlds to have courage enough to beg him not to go.

“Havre is across the sea,” she murmured. “Surely Uncle Brian would come home in time, if you waited.”

Waited! she caught a sight of Anne's bent profile, marble-like, with the shut eyes. Waited !

Agatha crept to her husband's side. “No—no waiting,” she whispered. “Go. I would not keep you back an hour. Bring him. Quick—quick.”

Could Anne have heard, that she wakened up into such a life-like smile? "No, dear, you must not send your husband away so hastily. Let him sail from Southampton to-morrow; that will do. He wants to talk to you to-day."

Nathanael looked surprised. "It is true, I did; and I told my brother to meet me here this afternoon. Did you know that too?"

"I guessed it. You are doing right, quite right. I knew you would. I knew *you*, Nathanael!"

She held out her hand to him, warmly.

"Dear Anne! But you forget—it is not I only who have to do it."

"Not a word! Go and tell her all. Let her be the first to hear it. Away with you! the sun is coming out. Run and talk in the garden-alleys, children!"

Her manner, so playful, yet full of keen

penetration, drove them away like a battery of sunbeams.

“What does she mean?” said Agatha, looking up puzzled, as they stood in the hall.

“She reads people’s minds wonderfully clear; she always did, but clearer than ever now. It is strange. Agatha, do you think——”

“I think all sorts of things about her—different and contrary every hour. But the chief thought of all is, that you must go to Havre at once. I long for Uncle Brian’s coming. How soon can you return?”

“As soon as practicable, you may be sure of that,” said Nathanael, rather coldly. “But you must relax your interest even in Uncle Brian, just now; I want to talk to you. Shall we go, as Anne said, into the garden-alleys?”

“Anywhere that is sunny and warm,”

said Agatha, with a light shiver. Her husband regarded her with that serious pathetic smile which was one of his frequent moods.

“Must you always have sunshine, Agatha? Could you not walk a little while in the shade? Not if I were with you?”

She cast her eyes down, trembling with a vague apprehension of ill; then gazed in the kind face, that grew kinder and dearer every day. She put her hand in her husband's, without speaking a word. He folded it up close, the soft little hand, and looked pleased.

“Come now, let us go into the garden.”

Agatha wrapped a shawl about her, gipsy-fashion, and met him there. It was one of those mild days that sometimes come near upon Christmas, as if the year had repented itself, and just before dying was dreaming of its lost spring-tide. The arbutus-trees were glistening with sunshine, and under the high wall a row of camellias, grown in great

bushes in the open air, the pride of Anne's gardener and of the whole county of Dorset, were beginning to show buds, red, white, and variegated, as beautiful as summer roses.

"I used to be so fond of this walk when I was a little lad," said Nathanael. "I remember, after I had the scarlet-fever, being nursed well here ; and how every day when my brother came, he used to carry me up and down this sunny walk on his back. Poor Fred ! he was the kindest fellow to children."

"Kindness seems his nature. I think that if your brother did any harm it would never be through malice or intention, but only weakness of character."

"I perceive," Mr. Harper said, abruptly—"you have no bitter feeling against my brother Frederick."

"How could I ? He never did me wrong. Except, perhaps, it was his carelessness that made me poor." Here Agatha hesitated, for

she was touching upon a dangerous subject—one so fraught with present emotion and with references to past suffering, that hitherto both husband and wife had by tacit consent abstained from it. There had been no confidential talk of any kind between them.

“Go on,” her husband said; “we must speak of these things some time; why not now?”

“Though he made me poor,” she continued, “it was probably through accident. And I have no fear of poverty”—how simply and ignorantly she pronounced that terrible word!—“I do not mind it in the least, if you do not.”

“Was there any need for that *if*, Agatha?”

“No,” she replied, faintly, and was silent. Shame and remorse rose over her like a cloud. She thought of those wicked words she had spoken—words which to this day he had

neither answered nor revenged. He had even suffered the smooth surface of daily kindnesses to grow over that gaping wound of division. Was it there still? Did he remember it? Could she dare to allude to it, if only to implore him to forgive her? She would in a little time—perhaps when they were by themselves in their own house, when she would throw herself at his knees and weep out a confession that was beyond all words—words could but insult him the more. There are some wounds that can only be healed by love and silence.

“I think it is time,” said the husband—“full time that you heard all, or nearly all, connected with this painful matter. It is mere business, which I will try to make intelligible if possible. You ought not to be quite so ignorant of worldly matters as you are, since, if anything happened to me——But I have provided against almost everything.”

"What are you talking of?" said Agatha, holding him tight, with a faint intuition of his meaning.

"Of nothing painful. Do not be afraid. Only that I think it right to explain to you what has occurred since our marriage—in worldly things I mean."

"Yes. I am listening."

"Before we married," he continued, distinctly, and rather proudly, "I knew nothing whatever of your fortune—not even its amount. I made no inquiries, interfered in no way, except reading the settlement I signed. The settlement stated that your property was safe in the Funds. This was a"—his brow darkened and his voice grew suppressed—"it was—*not true*. The whole had been taken out, contrary to your father's expressed will, and embarked in a mining speculation in Cornwall."

"Those miners whom Miss Valery aided? Was it my money that was wasted at Wheal

Caroline? Was it I from whom the poor miner came to seek redress?"

"No ; the transaction was more blameable than that. It was all carried on in my brother's name. He was made what they call 'managing director' of the company ; Grimes being solicitor. There were a few shareholders—his clients—widows and unmarried women who had put by their savings, and such like poor people who wanted large interest, and some richer ones, important enough to make public their ruin—for everybody lost all."

"But the poorer shareholders—the widows—the old maids?"

"Ay, there's the pity—there's the wickedness," said Nathanael, beneath his breath. "People tell me such things are common in England, but I would have starved rather than have been mixed up in such a transaction, even in the smallest way, and with property that was *bonâ fide* my own."

“And,” said Agatha, slowly coming to the light, “this property was not exactly Major Harper’s own. Also, his doing the thing secretly afterwards, and leading you to believe what was—not quite true.” And she looked much shocked. “I think it was wrong of your brother.”

“Don’t let us talk of him more than we can help. Remember—a brother, Agatha!”

More light dawning on his strange conduct, his self-command, his secrecy even with her. His wife clung to his arm, her heart brimming with emotion that she dared not pour out. For he seemed inclined to be reserved even now.

“You see,” he added, as they walked along, he pausing now and then and breathing hard—“you see I have had some few things to try me.”

Agatha pressed his arm. Oh that she could break through that awe of him and his

goodness, that shame of her own foolish, erring self!

“ I would,” he said, stopping suddenly, and throwing up his head, with the brows and eyelids locked down and quivering—“ I would to God my father had died a month ago, and never heard of this !”

If only now Agatha could speak! But her throat felt choking.

They walked past the windows and looked in. “ There is Anne sitting by herself as she used to sit, watching Fred and me in the garden. He was such a handsome, gay young man. I felt so proud of being his little brother. And my poor father—he had not a hope in the world that did not rest on Frederick.”

He walked on rapidly back into the shadiest and darkest walk. There he stopped. “ Agatha,” taking both her hands, and reading her features closely—“ Agatha,

would you be very unhappy if we went back and lived, poor, in the little cottage?"

"Unhappy? I?"

"I would try that you should not be. I can earn quite enough to give you many comforts. We should not be any more content if we claimed our rights and lived in prosperity at Kingcombe Holm."

"Oh, no!"

"Besides, I am not sure that these are our rights, morally speaking. I think, if my father had lived long enough, he would have undone what he did in a moment of passion, and let the first will stand. This is what I have said to myself, when considering that I have duties towards my wife as well as towards others, and that this would restore what was taken from her. 'An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.' But, Agatha, we would not urge that law?"

"Never! God forbid! And he was so kind to me when I was an orphan."

"*Only* kind? Did he never——No, I am getting foolish. Say on, Agatha. Come, sit here; we can talk, and nobody can see or hear us." And he led his wife to a sheltered arbutus-bower. "Well, was my brother so kind to you?"

"He was, indeed. For the sake of that time, I would forgive him anything; I have already forgiven him a good deal."

"Indeed? Tell me or not, as you chose; I urge no right to pry into your secrets."

"Oh, don't look, don't speak in that way! Why should I not tell you? I would have told you before, had you asked. It was nothing——indeed nothing. But I was a proud girl, and he made me angry with him."

"For what cause?"

She grew confused——hesitated; the shamefacedness of girlhood came over her. "I will tell you," she said at last boldly. "It is surely no harm to tell anything to my husband.—Major Harper once said to Emma

Thornycroft, that he thought I was 'in love' with him."

"Well!"

"It was cruel, it was wicked, it insulted my pride. And more than that—it wounded me to the heart that *he* should say so."

"Was it—don't speak if you don't like—was it *true*?"

"No," cried Agatha, the blood rushing in a torrent over her face. "No, it was not true. I liked, I admired him in a free girlish way; but I never, never loved him."

There was a minute's hush in the arbutus-bower, and then Nathanael sank from his proud height, sank down to his wife's side—down, lower yet, to her very feet. He wrapped his arms round her waist, laying his head in her lap. His whole frame shook convulsively.

"Oh Heaven! You did not think *that*?" cried Agatha, appalled.

"I did, ever since the day we were mar-

ried. I heard him say so in the church.—He repeated it to me afterwards.—And it was a lie! Curse——”

“No, no, forgive him!” And Agatha sobbed on her husband’s neck, clasped by him as she never thought he would clasp her in this world.

At last he rose, pale and sad. “There is other forgiveness needed. I have been very cruel to you, Agatha. I had made him a promise, and to it I sacrificed myself and you too, without remorse. But now you see how it was. I could have judged my brother that I loved ;—I dared not *slay my enemy*.”

The only answer was a soft hand-pressure.

“I hardly know what I am about, Agatha—not even whether or no my wife loves me; she did not when we were first married, I fear?”

Agatha drooped her head.

“Never mind, she shall love me yet; I am quite fearless now.” He stood up, holding

her tight in his arms, as if daring the whole world to wrest her from him. His whole aspect was changed. It was like the breaking up of an Arctic winter, when the trees bud, and the rivers pour sounding down, and the sun bursts out, reigning gloriously. For a long time they remained thus, clasped together, so motionless that the little robin of the arbutus-trees hopped on to a bough near them and began a song.

“We must go in now,” said Agatha.

“Ay; we must not forget Anne, or anybody. One can do so much good when one is happy!”

“I feel so.” She rose, hanging on his arm, but trembling still, almost frightened by the insanity of his joy, whirled dizzily in the torrent of his overwhelming love.

“You understand now what I had to say to you? You can guess how I mean to act as regards my brother?”

“I think I can.”

“And you will give your consent? Without it I would have done nothing. I would not have taken from my wife these worldly goods, and left her only me and my love, unless she willed it so.”

“I do will it.”

“God bless her.” He lifted Agatha from her feet, rocking her in his arms like a baby. “I always said ‘God bless her!’ even when I was most wretched—most mad. I knew she was one of His angels—a woman worthy of all love, though she had none for me. I was not very cruel to her, was I?”

“No—no.”

“I will never be cruel to her any more. I will smother down all my pride, my reserve, the horrible suspiciousness which is rooted in my nature. I will never doubt or wound her—only love her—only love her.”

Breathless, Agatha trembled to her feet again. Her husband stood by her side—calmer now, and radiant in the beauty of his

youth. Manly as he was, there was something about him which could only be expressed by the word "beautiful"—a something that, be he ever so old, would keep up his boyish likeness—his look of "the angel Gabriel."

"Let us go into the house now."

They went—those two young hearts thrilling and bounding with life and joy—into the darkening house, the hushed presence of Anne Valery.

She was lying on her sofa, very still and death-like. The white cap tied under her chin, the hands folded—the perfect silence in and about the room—it was like as if she had lain down to rest, calmly and alone, in her solitary house, and in her sleep the spirit had flown away;—away into the glorious company of angels and archangels, never to be alone any more.

But it was not so. Hearing footsteps, Anne opened her eyes, and roused herself

quickly. She looked from one to the other of the young people—at the first glance she seemed to understand all. A great joy flashed across her; but she said nothing. She as well as they were long used to that peculiarity of nature—which especially belonged to the Harper family—a conviction of the uselessness of talk and the sacredness of silence.

“Has my brother arrived?” said Nathanael.

“Not yet.”

“Marmaduke is gone?”

“Yes; he wanted to get up a Free-trade dinner for the welcoming”—here she smiled—“of one whom he says all Dorset will be delighted to welcome—your Uncle Brian. Worthy Duke! It is his hobby, and one likes to indulge him in it.”

“Most certainly. And where is the dinner—Uncle Brian’s grand dinner—to take place?”

“I persuaded him to change it into a public meeting, and give the clay-cutters—many of them Mr. Locke Harper’s former people, and some now old and poor—a New Year’s feast instead. You will see to that, Nathanael?” And she laid her hand on his arm with rather more earnestness than the simple request warranted.

Nathanael assented hastily, and spoke of something else.

“I am rather sorry I asked my brother to meet me here ; I forgot he has not been to Thornhurst for so many years.”

“It is time then that he came,” said Anne, gently. “I shall be very glad to see him.”

While she was speaking her old servant entered, with the announcement of “Major Harper.”

Just the Major Harper of old—well-dressed, courtly, with his singularly handsome face, and his short dark moustache, sufficient to mark the military gentleman

without degrading him into the puppy ; Major Harper with his habitual good-natured smile and faultless bearing, so gratefully welcomed, so gaily familiar in London drawing-rooms.— But here?——

He paused at the door, glanced hastily round the old familiar room, with the known pictures hanging on the walls, and the windows opening on the straight alley of arbutus-trees. His smile grew rather meaningless—he hesitated.

“ Will you come to this chair near me ? I am very glad to see you, Major Harper.”

“ Thank you, Miss Valery.”

He crossed the room to her sofa, Nathanael making way for him. He just acknowledged his brother's presence and Agatha's, then took Miss Valery's extended hand, bowing over it with an attempt at his former grace.

“ I hope I find your health quite re-established ? This change to your own pleasant

house — pleasant as ever, I see" — he once more glanced round it—paused—then altogether broke down. "It seems but a day since we were children, Anne," he said, in a faltering voice.

Agatha and her husband moved away. They respected the one real feeling which had outlasted all his sentimentalisms. For several minutes they stood at the far window apart. When Anne called them back, Major Harper had recovered himself, and was sitting by her.

"Nathanael, our old friend here says you wished to speak with me?"

"I did."

"Make haste, then, for I am going to London to-night. I have made up my mind. I cannot settle here in Dorsetshire."

"Not if it were your father's wish—his last longing desire?"

"Anne, for God's sake don't speak of my

father." He leant his elbow on the table and covered his eyes.

Nathanael and Agatha exchanged looks, then both smiled—the happy smile of a clear conscience and a heart at rest. "Tell him now," whispered the wife to her husband.

"Brother!"

Major Harper lifted up his head.

"My elder brother!" And Nathanael offered the hand of peace, which, in spite of all outward and necessary association, neither had offered or grasped since Frederick's return to Dorset.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you are my elder brother—my father's favourite always. If he had lingered but another day he would doubtless have proved that, and have done—what I intend to do, just as if he had himself accomplished it. Do you understand me?"

"No!" And Major Harper looked thoroughly amazed.

"Do you see this? which you, either from forgetfulness, or trust in me—I had rather believe the latter—left in my hands on that day." And he drew from his pocket the will which had been read. "You spoke of throwing it into Chancery, and there would be scope for a century of Chancery business here. But I choose rather to respect the honour and unity of the family. Therefore, with my wife's entire consent, in her presence, Anne's, and yours, I here do what my father, had he lived, would certainly have done."

He took up the codicil, separated it from the will to which it was fastened by seals, and quietly, as if it had been a fragment of worthless paper, put it into the fire.

"Now, Frederick, the original will stands."

Frederick sat motionless. He seemed hardly to believe the evidence of his own

eyes. He watched the curling, crackling paper with a sort of childish curiosity. When at last it was completely destroyed, he shut his eyes with a great sigh of satisfaction.

Miss Valery softly touched him. "Major Harper, every brother would not have acted thus."

"No, indeed. Just Heavens, no!" he cried, as the whole fact burst on him, touching his impressible nature to the quick. "My dear Nathanael! My dear Agatha! God bless you both."

He wrung their hands fervently, and walked to the window, strongly affected. The husband and wife remained silent. Anne Valery lay on her sofa, and smoothed her thin fingers one over the other with a soft, inward smile.

"How nobly you both act towards me! and I—how have I acted towards you?" said the elder brother, returning with an aspect of

deep and real compunction. "I would give half I possess to undo what has been done, and all through my cursed folly and weakness. Do you know that I have lost every penny of your fortune, Agatha?"

"Mr. Grimes told me so lately."

"What, only lately? Did you not know before? Did not your husband——"

"No," she cried, eagerly. "My husband never betrayed you, even by a single word. I am glad he did not. I had far rather he had broken my heart than his own honour."

Anne turned to look at the young face, flushed with feeling; and her own caught something of the glow, though still she spoke not.

"But," said Major Harper, eagerly, addressing his sister-in-law—for Nathanael sat in one of those passive moods which those who knew him well alone could interpret—"but my honour must not be broken either. I must redeem all I lost; and I will, to the

very last farthing. Only wait a little, and you shall have no cause to blame me, my poor Agatha."

"Nay, *rich* Agatha," was the murmur that Nathanael heard, as two little hands came from behind and alit on his shoulders, like two soft white doves. He caught them, and rose contented, cheerful, and brave.

"No, Frederick, you must dismiss that idea. It is untenable, at least for a long time. Agatha and I are going to play at poverty." He smiled, and drew her nearer to him.

"Besides," said Miss Valery, putting in her quiet voice, to whose rare sounds every one always listened now, "I think there are perhaps stronger claims on Major Harper."

"Indeed? Anne, tell me what I can do. Anything," he added, much moved, "that my old friends may think well of me. Speak!"

She did so, raising herself, though with some exertion, and reassuming the sensible,

straightforward, business-like ways which through her long life of solitary independence had caused Anne Valery to be often called, as Duke Dugdale called her, "such a wise woman!"

"I should like very much to see all things settled in the Harper family. Your sisters are provided for; Eulalie will be married next year; and you will keep Mary and Elizabeth always with you at Kingcombe Holm. Promise that, Frederick."

He assented most energetically.

"There is no need to fear for these," looking affectionately at Nathanael and his wife. "Work is good for young people; and I—or others—will always see that they have work enough supplied to bring in wherewithal to keep the wolf from their door. For the present, they are a great deal better not very rich."

"Thank you, prudent Miss Valery," said Nathanael, laughing.

She responded cheerfully, and then turning to Major Harper, went on with seriousness :

“In other instances, much suffering has been caused by your means; and I would not have it said that any suffered through the Harper family. I have done what I could to prevent this. Matters are amending at Wheal Caroline. Nathanael tells me I shall have—that is, there will be—a fine flax-harvest there next year.”

Speaking of “next year,” Anne’s voice faltered, but the momentary feebleness passed.

“Still, there is one thing, Frederick, which nobody can do but you ; and it is necessary not only to save yourself but to redeem the honour of your house. It will not cost you much—only a few years’ retrenchment, living with your sisters at Kingcombe Holm.”

Again Major Harper protested there was nothing in the world he would not do for the sake of virtue and Anne Valery. She drew

her desk to her, and gave him paper and pen.

“Write here, that you will pay gradually to certain shareholders I know of the money they lost through trust in your name, and in that of the family. It is hardly a legal claim, or if it be, they are too poor to urge it—but I hold it as a bond of honour. Will you do this, Frederick? Then I shall be happy, knowing there is not a single stain on the Harper name.”

In speaking, she had risen and come beside him, looking faded and very wan-like, now she stood upright, with the long black folds of her dress, and her close cap. Her beauty was altogether of the past, but the moral influence remained.

Frederick Harper took the pen, hesitated, and laid it down. “I do not know what to write.”

Anne wrote for him a few plain words, such as a man of honour must inevitably hold

as binding. He watched idly the movement of the hand that wrote, and the written lines.

“ You have the same slender fingers, Anne, and your writing looks just as it used to do,” he said, in a subdued voice.

“ There, now—sign.”

“ Sign !—It is like executing a marriage settlement or a will.” And Major Harper tried to laugh.

“ I wish you to hold it so,” said Anne, in a low voice. “ Consider it my last will—my last desire, which you will fulfil for me.”

He looked at her, took the pen, and signed, his hand all trembling; then kissed hers—once in meaningless cavalier-fashion—a second time with the strong yet timid passion of a boy.

“ Anne, you know, you were my first-love.”

The words—said half jesting, yet with a certain mournfulness—were scarcely out of his lips, than he had quitted the room. They

soon heard the clatter of his horse along the avenue. Major Harper was gone out into the busy world again. He never set foot in quiet Thornhurst more.

The three that were left behind breathed freer—perhaps they would hardly have acknowledged it, but it was so.

“Well, now it is all done,” said Nathanael, as he drew closer to the sofa where Anne lay—thoughtful, and, oh! so pale!—with Agatha performing all sorts of little unnoticed cares about her. “And now I must think about going.”

No one asked him where, but Agatha, glancing out of the window, thought, with a shiver, of the great wide ocean curving over into boundlessness from behind those hills.

“I find I must go at once,” he continued, “if I would catch the next boat to Havre. It sails from Southampton to-morrow morning. I have just time to ride back to Kingcombe and catch the mail train. No, I’ll not let

you come home with me," he added, answering a timid look of Agatha's, which seemed to ask, should she come and help him? "No, dear, I can help myself—such a useful-handed bachelor doesn't want a wife even to pack up for him. And, possibly, if you were with me, I should only find it the harder to go. It is rather hard."

"But it is right."

"I think," said Anne, faintly—they had not known she was listening—"I think it is right, or I would not let Nathanael go. And Heaven will take care of him, and bring him safe home to you, Agatha. Be content."

"I was content," she said, somewhat lightly. It was a strange thing, but yet human nature, that these passionate tender-nesses of her husband only seemed to make her own feelings grow calm. Whether it was the shyness of her girlhood, or the variable-ness of a love not spontaneous but slowly responsive, or whether—a feeling wrong, yet

alas! wondrously natural—it was the mere wilfulness of a woman who knows herself to be so infinitely beloved, certain it was that Agatha appeared not quite the same as a few hours before. Affectionate still, and happy, happier than it is the nature of deep love to be; yet there was a something wanting—some strong stroke to cleave her heart, and show beyond all doubt what lay at its core. The heart often needs such teaching; and if so, surely—most surely it will come.

Agatha followed her husband to the hall. He was grave with his leave-taking of Anne Valery, who had looked less cheerful, and had breathed rather than spoken the last “God bless you!—Come back soon.” The young man did not again say, even to himself, anything about his journey being “hard.”

But as he stood in the hall with his wife, he lingered. Youth is youth, and love is love, and each seems so real—life's only

reality while it lasts. No human being, while drinking the magic cup, ever looks or listens to those who have drank, and set it down empty. Be the history ever so sad, each one thinks, smiling, "Oh, but I shall be happier than these."

Nathanael took his wife in his arms to bid her good-by. She stood, looking down; bashful, reserved, but so fair ! And so good likewise—all her girlish whims could not hide her heart-goodness. In her whole demeanour was the germ of that noble womanhood which every good man wishes his wife to possess, that she may become his heart of hearts, the desired and honoured of his soul, and remain such, long after all passion dies. There was one light only wanting in her—the light which played waveringly in and out—sometimes flashing so true and warm and bright, and then disappearing into clouds and mist. The husband could not catch it—not though his eyes were wasting for the blessed ray.

“These few days will seem a long time, Agatha.”

“Will they?”

Nathanael took the smiling face between his hands, and looked down, far down, into the brown depths of her eyes. “Do you——” He hesitated. “I never asked the question before, knowing it vain; but now, when I am going away—when——”

He paused, the deep passion quivering through his voice.—“Do you love me, Agatha?”

She smiled—some insane, wicked influence must have been upon her—but she smiled, hung her head in childish fashion, and whispered, “I don’t know.”

“Well—well!” He sighed, and after a brief silence bade her good-by, kissed her once, and went towards the door.

“Ah—don’t go yet. I was very foolish. I never, never can be half so wise as you. Forgive me.”

“Forgive you, my child? Ay, anything.” And he received her as she ran into his arms, kissing her again tenderly, with a sad earnestness that almost increased his love.

“Now I must go, my darling wife. Take care of yourself, and good-by.”

So they parted. Agatha went in, dry-eyed; then locked herself in the library, and cried violently and long.

CHAPTER VIII.

“THEY are sure to be home to-morrow ; nothing can prevent their being home to-morrow,” said Agatha, as she read over, neither for the first time, nor the second, nor the third, her husband’s letter, received from Havre.

It was night now, and they were sitting by the fire in Miss Valery’s dressing-room. It had been one of Anne’s best days ; a wonderfully good day ; she had walked about the house, and given several orders to her delighted servants, who, old as they were, would have obeyed the most onerous commands for the pleasure of seeing their mistress strong enough to give them. Some, however, won-

dered why she should be so particular about the order of a house that never was in disorder, and especially why various furniture arrangements which had gradually in the course of time been altered, should be pertinaciously restored, so that all things might look just as they did years and years ago. Also, though it was a few days in advance of the orthodox day, she would have the house adorned with "Christmas," until it looked a perfect bower.

"It do seem, Mrs. Harper," said the old housekeeper, confidentially—"it do seem just as on the last merry Christmas, afore the family was broke up, and Mr. Frederick turned soldier, and Mr. Locke Harper—that's his uncle—went away with little Master Nathanael, Mr. Locke Harper as is now."

And Agatha had laughed very heartily at the idea of her husband being "little Master Nathanael;" but she had not told this conversation to Anne Valery.

All afternoon the house had been oppressively lively, thanks to a visit from the Dugdale children ; which little elves were sent out of the way while their mother performed the not unnecessary duty of putting her establishment in order. For Harrie was determined that her house, and none other, should have the honour of receiving Uncle Brian. As Nathanael had taken for granted the same thing, and as Mary Harper had likewise communicated her opinion, that it was against all etiquette for her poor father's only brother to be welcomed anywhere but at Kingcombe Holm, there seemed likely to be a tolerable family fight over the possession of the said Uncle Brian.

The little Dugdales had talked of him incessantly all day, communicating their expectations concerning him in such a funny fashion that Agatha was ready to die with laughing, and even Anne, who had insisted on having the children about her, was heard

to laugh sometimes. She let little Brian climb about her sofa, and answered all sorts of eccentric questions from the others, never seeming weary. At last, when the sound of merry young voices had died out of the house, and its large, lofty rooms grew solemn with the wailing of the wind, Anne had retreated to her dressing-room, where with her white gown wrapped round her, she sat watching the fire-light, or answering in fragments to Agatha's conversation.

This conversation was wandering enough ; catching up various topics, and then letting them drop like broken threads, but all winding themselves into one and the same subject. " They will be home to-morrow."

" I hope, nay, I am sure of it, God willing !" said Anne, softly. " He often puts hindrances in our way, but in the end He always works things round, and we see them clearly afterwards. Still we ought hardly to say even of the strongest love or dearest wish

we have, 'It *must* be,' without also saying 'God willing.'"

Agatha replied not. This was a new doctrine for her. How rarely in her young, passionless, sorrowless life, she had thought of the few words, oft used in cant, and Agatha hated all cant—"the will of God." She pondered over them much.

"What sort of a night is it?" said Anne, at length.

"Very dreary and rainy, and the wind is high."

"No matter, it will not reach them. The *Ardente* will be safe in Southampton-water by this time."

Agatha recurred to the perpetual letter; "Yes, so my husband tells me here."

"And therefore," Miss Valery continued, laying her hand over the paper, "his good little wife shall fold up this, and not weary herself any more with anxiety about him.

Those who love ought above all others to trust in God."

After this they sat patient and content—nay, oftentimes quite merry, for Agatha strove hard to amuse her companion. And the wind sang its song without—not threateningly, but rather in mirth; and the fire burnt brightly within. And no one thought of them but as friends and servants—the terrible Wind, the devouring Fire.

It was growing late, and Agatha began to use the petty tyranny with which Miss Valery had invested her, insisting on her friend's going to bed.

"I will presently; only give me time—a little time. I am not so young as you, my child, and have not so many hours to waste in sleeping. There now, I'll be good. Wait—you see I am already pulling down my hair."

She did so, rather feebly. It fell on her

shoulders longer and thicker than any one would have believed—it was really beautiful, except for those broad white streaks.

“What soft fine hair,” cried Agatha, admiringly. “Ah, you shall go without caps in the spring—I declare you shall.”

“Not at my age.”

“That cannot be so very ancient. I shouldn't mind asking you the direct question, for I am sure you are not one of those foolish women who are ashamed to tell their age, as if any number of years matters while we keep a young warm heart.”

“I am thirty-eight or thirty-nine, I forget which,” said Anne, simply, as she drew her fingers through the long locks, gazing down on them with some pensiveness. “I never liked hair of this colour, neither brown nor black ; but mine was always soft and smooth, and some people used to think it pretty once.”

“It is pretty now. You will always be

beautiful, dear, dear Anne ! I will call you Anne, for you are scarcely older than I, except in a few contemptible years not worth mentioning," continued the girl, sturdily. "And I will have you as happy, too, as I."

Anne sat silent a minute or two, the hair dropping over her face. Then she raised it and looked into the fire with a calm sweet look that Agatha thought perfectly divine.

"I have been happy," she said. "That is, I have not been unhappy—God knows I have not. I have had a great deal to do always, and in all my labour was there profit. It comforted me, and helped to comfort others ; it made me feel that my life was not wholly thrown away, as many an unmarried woman's is, but as no one's ever need be."

"But some are. Think of Jane Ianson, of whom Emma wrote me word yesterday. If ever any woman spent a mournful, useless life and died of a broken heart, it was poor Jane Ianson."

“ Her story was pitiful, but she somewhat erred,” Anne answered, thoughtfully. “ No human being *ought* to die of a ‘ broken heart ’ (as the phrase is) while God is in His heaven, and has work to be done upon His earth. There are but two things that can really throw a lasting shadow over woman’s existence—an unworthy love, and one whose fulfilment fate forbids. The first ought to be rooted out at all risks ; for the other—let it stay ! There are more things in life than mere marrying and being happy. And for love—a high, pure, holy love, held ever faithful to one object,”—and as she spoke, Anne’s whole face lightened and grew young—“ no fortune or misfortune—no time or distance—no power either in earth or heaven can alter *that*.”

There was a pause, during which the two women sat silent and grave. And the wind howled round the house, and the fire crackled

harmlessly in the chimney, but they noticed neither—the fierce Wind—the awful Fire.

“It is a wild night,” said Agatha at last. “But they are landed at Southampton long ago. Last night was lovely—such a moon! and they were sure to sail, because the *Ardente* only plies once a week, and there is no other boat this winter-time. Oh, yes! they are quite safe in Southampton. I shouldn’t wonder if they were both here to breakfast to-morrow.”

And Agatha, with her little heart beating quick, merrily, and fast, never thought to look at her companion. Anne’s eyes were dilated, her lips quivering—all her serenity was gone.

“To-morrow—to-morrow,” she murmured, and as with a sudden pain, put her hand to her chest, breathing hard and rapidly. “Agatha, hold me fast—don’t let me go—just for a little while. To be so near, and then—I *cannot* go! Oh, Agatha.”

She clung to the young girl with a pallid, frightened aspect, like one who looks down into a place of darkness, and shudders on its verge. Never before had that expression been seen in Anne Valery. Slowly it passed away, leaving the calmness that was habitual to her. Agatha hung round her neck, and kissed her into smiles.

“Now,” she said, rising, “let us both go to bed. You look tired, my child, and we must have your very best looks when you make breakfast for *them* in the morning. That is, if they both come here.”

“They will come—my husband says so,” cried Agatha, forgetting both secrecy and delicacy in her thorough joy. “He knows, and is determined that Uncle Brian shall know—everything.”

Anne sat still—so still, that her young companion was afraid she had vexed her. She lamented this, imploringly.

“No, dear—not vexed. But no human

being can know everything! It lies between him and me—and God.”

So saying, she rose, fastened up the long hair in which the last lingering beauty of her youth lay—put on her little close cap, and was again the composed gentle lady of middle age.

She rung for the housekeeper, and gave various orders for the morning, designating a few trivial additions to the breakfast that would have made Agatha smile, but that she noted a slight hesitation in the voice that ordered them.

“Is there anything your husband would like especially? I don’t quite understand his ways.”

Agatha blushed as she answered—
“Nor I.”

“You will not answer so in a few months hence,” said Anne, when they were alone.
“It is a very unromantic doctrine, but few young wives know how much the happiness

of a home depends on little things—that is, if anything can be little which is done for *his* comfort, and is pleasant to *him*. There's a lecture for you, Mistress Agatha. Now go to bed, and rise in the morning to begin a new era, as the happiest and best wife in all England."

"I will," cried Agatha, laughing, though with a tear or two in her eyes. To think how much Anne had guessed of the wretched past, yet, with true delicacy, how entirely she had concealed that knowledge!

They embraced silently, and then Miss Valery went into her own room, where, year after year, when all the duties and cheerfulnesses of the day were done, the solitary woman had shut herself in—alone with her own heart and with God. The young wife stood and looked with thoughtful reverence at the closed door of that room.

It was eleven o'clock, yet somehow Mrs. Harper did not feel inclined to go to bed.

She had too many things to think of, too many plans to make and resolutions to form. Her life must settle itself calmly now. Its trouble, tumult, and uncertainty were over. She felt quite sure of her husband's goodness—of his deep and tender love for herself—nay, also of her own for him—only that was a different sort of feeling. She thought less on this than on the other side of the subject—how sweet it was to be so dear to him. She would try and deserve him more—be to him a faithful wife and a good housewife, and make herself happy in his devotion.

She smiled as she passed through the hall where he had stood and said, "Do you love me?" She wished she had frankly answered "Yes," as was indeed the truth; only his strong love had lately made her own seem so poor and weak.

Lingering on the spot which his feet had last pressed, she tried to fancy him beside her, and acted the scene over again, "making

believe," childish fashion, that she stood on tiptoe attempting to reach up to his mouth—a very long way!—and there breathing out the "Yes" in a perfectly justifiable and unquestionable fashion. And then she laughed at her own conceit—the foolish little wife!—and tripped off into the drawing-room, lest the old butler, who always went round the house at midnight to see that all was safe, might catch her at her antics. Still, were they not quite natural? Was she not a very happy and fondly-worshipped wife? and was not her husband coming home the next morning?

Entering the drawing-room, her high spirits were somewhat sobered down; its atmosphere felt so gloomy and cold. The fire had nearly died out—the ill-natured fire, that did not know there was a cheerful little woman coming to sit beside it and dream of all sorts of pleasant things.

"I wish fires would never go out," said

Agatha, rather crossly ; and she stirred it, and blew it, and cherished it, as if it were the only pleasant companion in this dreary room.

“ How I do love fire,” she said at last, as she sat down on the hearth-rug and warmed her little feet and hands by the blaze, and would not look in the dark corners of the room, but kept her face turned from them, as during her whole life she had kept it turned away from all gloomy subjects. Passionate anguish of her own making, she had known ; but that stern, irremediable sorrow which comes direct from the unseen Mover of all things and lays its heavy hand on the sufferer's head, saying, “ Be still, and know that I am God ”—this teaching, which must come to every human soul that is worth its destiny, had never yet come to Agatha Harper.

Was it this unknown something even now tracking her, that made her long for the familiar daylight, and feel afraid of night, with its silence, its solitude, and its dark ?

“ I will go to bed and try to sleep,” she said. “ It is but a few hours. My husband is certain to be here in the morning.”

She rose, laughed at herself for starting on some slight noise in the quiet house—old Andrews locking up the front door, probably—snuffed her candle to make it as bright as possible, and prepared to go upstairs.

A light knock at the door.

“ Come in, Andrews. The fire is all safe, and I shall vanish now.”

She said this without looking round. When she did look she was somewhat surprised to see, not the butler, but Marmaduke Dugdale. It was odd, certainly, but then Duke had such very odd ways, and was always turning up at impossible hours and in eccentric fashion. He looked eccentric enough now, being thoroughly drenched, with a queer, scared expression on his face.

Agatha was amused by it. "Why, what a late visitor you are ! The children are gone home hours ago, though they waited ever so long for 'Pa.' Have you been all this while at Mr. Trenchard's ?"

"I haven't been there at all."

Agatha smiled.

"Don't'ee laugh—now don't'ee, Mrs. Harper." And Duke sat down, pushing the dripping hair from his forehead, pulling his face into all sorts of contortions, until at last it sunk between his hands, and those clear, honest, always beautiful eyes, alone confronted her. There was that in their expression which startled Agatha.

"What did you come for so late, Mr. Dugdale ?"

"What did I come for?" he vaguely repeated. "Now don't'ee tremble so. We must hope for the best, my child."

Agatha felt a sudden stoppage at the

heart which took away her breath. "Tell me—quick; I shall not be frightened;—he is coming home to-morrow."

"My dear child!" muttered Duke again, as he held out his hands to her, and she saw that tears were dropping over his cheeks.

Agatha clutched at the hands threateningly—she felt herself going wild. "Tell me, I say. If you don't—I'll——"

"Hush—I'll tell you—only hush!—think of poor Anne! And there's hope yet. Only they have not come into Southampton-roads—and last night there was a fire seen far out at sea—and it might have been a ship, you know."

Thus disconnectedly Marmaduke broke his terrible news. Agatha received them with a wild stare.

"It's impossible—totally impossible," she cried, uttering sounds that were half shrieking, half laughter. "Absolutely, ridicu-

lously impossible. I'll not believe it—not a word. It's impossible—*impossible !*”

And gasping out that one word, over and over again, fiercely and fast, she walked up and down the room like one distraught. She was indeed quite mad. She had not any sense of anything. She never once thought of weeping, or fainting, or doing anything but shriek out to earth and Heaven that one denunciation—that such a thing was and must be—“*impossible !*”

Marmaduke caught her with his kind, pitying arms—she flung them aside like reeds.

“Don't touch me—don't speak to me ! I say it's *impossible !*”

“Child !” And his look became more grave and commanding than any one would have believed of the mild Duke Dugdale. “Dare not to say impossible ! It is sinning against God.”

Agatha stopped in her frenzied walk. Of

a sudden came the horrible thought that *it might be*—that the hand might have been lifted—have fallen, striking the whole world from her at one blow:

“Oh God!—oh merciful God!”

In that cry, scarcely louder than a moan, yet strong and wild enough to pierce the heavens, Agatha knew how she loved her husband. Not calmly, not meekly, but with that terrible love which is to the heart as life itself.

Of the next few minutes that passed over her no one could write—no one would dare. It was utter insanity, yet with a perfect knowledge of its state. Madness, stone-blind, stone-deaf—that uttered no cry, and poured out no tears. She walked swiftly up and down the room, her hands clenched, her features rigid as iron. Mr. Dugdale and old Andrews could only watch pitifully, saying at times—which may all good Christians say likewise!—“God have mercy upon her.”

No one else came near—the servants were all asleep, and Miss Valery's room was in another part of the house. Possibly she slept too—poor Anne!

“Now,” said Agatha, in a cold, hard voice, clutching Marmaduke's arm, “I want to know all about it. I don't believe it, mind you!—not one word—but I would like to hear. Just tell me. How did you get the news?”

“From Southampton, to-night. It happened last night. A steamer saw the burning ship, and went, but the fire had already reached to the water's edge. There was not a soul in or near the wreck when it went down.”

Agatha shuddered, and then said, in the same hard voice: “It was some other ship—not the *Ardente*.”

Marmaduke shook his head, drearily. “They found a spar with ‘*Ardente*’ upon it. But they saw no boats, and some

people think, as there were few passengers, they all got safe off, and may reach the shore."

"Of course they will!—I was sure of that;" returned Agatha, in the same wild, determined tone. "Let me see! it was a quiet night. I stood a long time looking at the moon—Ah!"

The ghastly thought of her standing there looking up at the moon, and the pitiless moon looking down on the sea and on him! Agatha's senses reeled—she burst into the most awful laughter.

Marmaduke held her fast—the whimsical, absent Marmaduke—now roused into his true character, kind as any woman, and wiser than most men.

"Agatha, you must be quiet. It is wicked ever to despair. There is a chance—more than a chance, that your husband has been saved. He has infinite presence of mind,

and he is a young, strong, likely lad. But Brian—poor Brian ! my dear old friend !”

Duke Dugdale's bravery gave way—he was of such a gentle, tender heart. The sight of his emotion stilled Agatha's frenzy, and made it more like a natural grief, though it was hard yet—hard as stone.

“Come,” she said, taking his hand, and smiling piteously—“come—don't cry. I can't !—not for the world. Let us talk. What are you going to do ?”

“I am going right off to Southampton—whence they have sent steamers out in all directions to pick up the boats, if they are drifting anywhere about the Channel. Fancy—to be out in the open sea, this winter-time, with possibly no clothes or food !”

“Hush !”—shuddered Agatha's low voice—“hush ! or I shall go quite mad, and I would rather not just yet—*afterwards*, I shall not mind.”

“Poor child!”

“Don’t now,” and she shrank from him. “Never think of me—*that* does not signify. Only something must be done. No weeping—no talking—*do* something!”

“I told you I should. I am going——”

“Go, then!” Her quick speech—the wild stamp of her foot—poor child, how mad she was still!

Mr. Dugdale took no notice, except by a compassionate look—perhaps he too felt there was no time to lose. He went towards the door—she following.

“I am off now—I shall catch the train in two hours,” said he, springing on his horse in the dark wet night. “Harrie will be with you directly—only she thought I had better come first. Go in—go in—my poor child.”

Agatha obeyed mechanically, for the moment. She walked about the house, in at one room and out at another, meeting no person—for Andrews had gone to call up

some of the servants. 'The heavy quiet around stifled her. Faster and faster she walked—clutching her hands on her throat for breath—sometimes uttering, with a sort of laughing shriek, the one word in which seemed her only salvation—"Impossible!—utterly and entirely impossible!"

She sat down for a moment, trying to think over more clearly the chances of the case—but to keep still was beyond her power. She resumed that rapid walk as if she were flying through an atmosphere of invisible fiends. It felt like it.

Once, by a superhuman effort, she drove her mind to contemplate the *possible*—the winds, the flames, the waves, and him struggling among them. She saw the face which she had last seen so life-like—as a *dead face*, with its pale, pure features and fair hair. And even *that* face never to be again seen by her through any possible chance! For him to be blotted out altogether

from the world, and she left therein! "Oh, God—oh, God!" The despairing, accusing shriek that she sent up to His mercy!—May His mercy have received and forgiven it!

She began to count up the hours that must pass before she could receive any tidings, good or ill. To stay quietly in the house and wait for them!—you might as well have told a poor wretch to sit still, bound, and wait for the stroke of heaven's lightning! No rest—no rest. The very walls of the house seemed to press upon her and hem her in. She saw a bonnet and shawl hanging up in the hall, caught both, and ran out at the front door.

Out—out under the stars. She walked with her face lifted right up to them, her eyes flashing out an insane defiance to their merciless calm. The rain fell down thick, and it was very cold, but she never thought of putting on bonnet or shawl; or, if she thought at all, it was with a

sort of longing that the rain might come and cool her through and through, or the sharp wind pierce to her breast and kill her. Once she had a thought of running a mile or two across the hills, and leaping from some cliffs into the sea ; so that, whichever way this suspense ended, she might be safely dead beforehand—dead, too, in the same ocean, washed by the same wave. All the foolish Romeo-and-Juliet-like traditions of people killing themselves on some beloved's tomb, seemed to her now perfectly real, possible, and natural. Nothing was impossible—save living.

How to live, even for a day, an hour, in this horrible, deathly stagnation, she did not know. At last, walking on blindly through the night, she came to the termination of the Thornhurst estate. Was she to go back and lull herself into the stupor of patience?—be kissed and wept over, and preached resignation to?—left to sit mutely in that quiet.

house, while he was dashed about, fighting with the sea for life?—or watching the clock's travelling round hour after hour, not knowing but that every peaceful minute might be the terrible one in which he died?

“No,” she said to herself, while the awful but delirious joy which has struck many in a similar position struck her suddenly, “he is not dead. If he had died, he would have told me—me whom he so loved. He could not die anywhere, or at any time, but in some way or other I should have known it.”

And as she stood in the dark road—quite alone with the hills and stars, calmed down into a supernatural awe, Agatha almost expected to see her husband stand before her in the old familiar likeness. She would not have been afraid.

But no apparition came. All nature, visible and invisible, was silent to her misery. If she went back to the house, all there would be silent too.

She took her resolution—though it could hardly be called a resolution, being merely the blind impulse of despair. She climbed over the gate—she had not wit enough to unfasten it—and ran, swift and silent as some wild animal, along the road to Kingcombe.

The rain ceased, and her dripping clothes dried of themselves, so as not to encumber her movements. By some chance her feet were well shod, and now, gathering her wits as she went, she put on the shawl—not the bonnet, her head burned so, and felt so wild. Just then, far into the darkness, she heard wheels rolling and rolling. It was only Mrs. Dugdale driving along rapidly—but without one slash of the whip or one word of conversation with Duncie. When she stopped to open a gate the glare of the chaise-lamps showed the little black figure by the roadside. Harrie screamed—she thought it was a ghost.

Agatha never moved, but let her pass, and then fled on and on, noticing nothing, except once, when with a start she saw the great black outline of C—— Castle looming against the night-sky.

When she reached Kingcombe, not a speck of dawn was visible over the hills. She could not even have found her way, save for the faint skyey brightness lent by the over-cast moon ; and the distance she had traversed was all but miraculous. It seemed as if she had not walked by natural feet, but some unseen influence had drawn and lifted her the whole way. When she stood in Kingcombe streets she hardly believed her senses ; save that nothing was hard of belief just then—except the one horror, incredible, unutterable.

Mr. Dugdale was walking up and down Kingcombe railway station, waiting for the early train. One or two sleepy porters were eyeing him with a sort of pitying curiosity,

for ill news spreads fast in a country neighbourhood. There was no one else about—the morning was so young that it was still dark. Nobody perceived a little figure creeping up the road and coming on the platform. Even Marmaduke did not lift his eyes or relax his melancholy walk until something touched him on the arm. He stood astonished.

“It is I, you see. You are not gone yet?”

“How did you come—you poor child?”

“From Thornhurst—I walked. But how soon shall you start?”

“Walked from Thornhurst!—at this time of night!” said one of the railway-men, who knew the family—as indeed did every one in the neighbourhood. “Lord help us—it’s that poor Mrs. Harper!”

He stepped back, awed even beyond sympathy. Mr. Dugdale tried to remove Agatha from the platform, but she resisted.

"I am come to go with you to Southampton."

"What need of that? Go back to my house, poor child. If anything is to be done I can do it. If nothing—why——"

"I *will* go."

The determination was so calm, the grasp of the little hand so strong, that her brother-in-law urged no more. He went in his quiet way to take her ticket, the railway folk moving respectfully aside, and whispering among themselves something about "poor Mrs. Harper, that was going to Southampton to see after her husband."

Coming back, Duke attempted not to talk to her, but stood by her side—she *would* stand—sometimes feeling at her damp shawl, or wrapping her up in the tender, careful fashion that he used to his own little ones. At last the great fiery eye, accompanied by the iron beast's snorting gasps, appeared far

in the dark. Agatha drew a long breath, like a sob.

Mr. Dugdale lifted her in the carriage, almost without a word. One of the railway-men brought from somewhere—nobody ever learned where—a rug for her feet, and a pillow for her head to lean on. A minute more, and they were whirled away.

CHAPTER IX.

EVERY one knows that story, perhaps the most terrible of its kind for many years—and Heaven grant ! for many more to come—when a noble ship, with her full complement of human beings, fought at once with winds, and waves, and fire, until came down upon it and upon all the homes which that one hour desolated, the certain doom. We should shudder at even writing of such things, save that they must of necessity happen, and not rarely. But for one such tale as that of the *Amazon*, which convulses a whole kingdom with horror, there must be many unknown chronicles of equal dread, save

that the little vessel sinks unnoticed into its sea grave, and the destruction carried with it passes not beyond its own immediate sphere. Such was the case with the *Ardente*.

When the train neared Southampton it was already bright morning. Everybody was moving about on the solid, safe, sunshiny earth—nobody thought of shipwrecks and disasters at sea. Many a one looked lazily at the glittering Southampton-water ; no one dreamed how, far beyond the curving line of horizon, human beings—husbands and brothers—might be floating about without food or water, frozen, thirsting, dying or dead, under the same sunny sky.

Passing the spot where the wide reach of bay opens, Marmaduke quickly drew down the carriage-blind. He would not for worlds that the poor Agatha should look at that merry-glancing, cruel sea. She seemed to notice the movement, and stirred from the

corner where she had sat during all the journey, motionless, save for her perpetually open eyes.

“How light it is! quite morning!”

Marmaduke turned, felt her pulse, and began softly chafing her cold hand.

“Don’t, now,” she said piteously. “Don’t be kind to me—please don’t! Talk a little. Tell me what you think it best to do first.”

The sharp-lined, worn face, not pallid, or without consciousness—some people have the curse that they never can lose consciousness—how mournfully did worthy Duke regard it! But he did not say a word of sympathy; he knew she could not bear it. Her physical powers were so tightly strung that the least soft touch would make them give way altogether.

Mr. Dugdale stated briefly, and as if it had been the most matter-of-fact thing in the world, how he meant to go to the owners of the *Ardente* and get the first

tidings of her there ; how, if neither that nor any rumours he could catch in and about the docks, were satisfactory, he should hire a small steamer and beat up and down Channel, at the same time sending messengers to inquire at all the ports where it was likely boats might have been picked up.

“ They would be, probably, in twenty-four hours or so. If we don’t hear in three days—three days at this time of year”—he stopped with a perceptible shudder—“ then, Agatha,” and Duke’s gentle voice grew gentler, and solemn like a psalm, “ then, my child, we’ll go home.”

Agatha bowed her head. Bodily exhaustion made her spirit quieter, and soothed her into a feeling which made even the last dread alternative less fearful. She felt a conviction that such “ going home ” would only be a prelude to the last going home of all, when she should never part from her husband

more. She did not much mind now, even if all were to end so. Perhaps it would be best.

They got out of the carriage. All her limbs were cramped—she could hardly stand. Mr. Dugdale took her, unresisting, to a quiet inn he knew, and there made her lie down and take food. Somehow, even in the last extremity, Duke Dugdale could win people over to do his pleasure, which was always for their own good. He sat by her and talked, but only for a few minutes—he had no thought of wasting even in kindness the time on which might hang life or death.

“I am going now, and you must stay here till my return, which is sure not to be for at least two hours.”

“Two hours!—Oh, take me with you!”

Duke shook his head. “It would only hinder me, I fear. See there, now!”

Trying to rise and cross the parlour, she had nearly fallen. A drowsy weakness stole

over her—she let her good brother have his own way entirely. Very soon she found herself alone in the inn-parlour, lying in the dusky light of closed blinds, with the dull murmur creeping up from the street—lying quietly, in a state of passive patience.

No human brain can endure a great strain of mental anguish long. A merciful numbness usually seizes it, in which all things grow hazy and unreal, and consequently painless. Agatha felt convinced she was half-asleep, and that she should wake up in her own room at Thornhurst or at Kingcombe, and find out everything to be a dream. Or even granting its reality, she seemed to view the whole story like some unconcerned person, or some being from whom this troubled world had passed away, and grown less than nothing and vanity. She gazed down upon herself as it were from a great height, thinking how sad a story this was, and how it

would have grieved herself to hear it of any one else. But all her thoughts were disconnected and unnatural. The only tangible feeling was a sort of comfort in remembering the last day that she and her husband had spent together—in thinking how he loved her, and that, living or dying, he would know how she loved him now.

In this state she lay for an indefinite time—a period that bore no human measurement. It seemed at once a day and a moment. No counted time could ever appear so like eternity.

At last there was a hand upon the door. Mr. Dugdale had come back. Agatha started up, and sat frozen into the silence of a corpse. For her life's worth she could not have uttered a sound. He took her hand, saying, gently :

“My dear child!”

Surely he could not have spoken so, if——

No, in that case his lips would have been paralysed, like her own.

“We must bear up yet, my poor little sister. There is a chance.”

The flood broke forth. Agatha flung herself on the sofa-cushions, sobbing, weeping, and laughing at once. Duke patted her on the shoulder, walked round her, stood eyeing her with his mild, investigating look, as if he were pondering some great new problem in human nature. Finally, he sat down beside her, and cried likewise.

Agatha for the first time spoke naturally. “Thank you, brother—you are a very good brother to me. Now, tell me everything.

“Everything is but little. It’s like hanging on at hread—but we’ll hold on.”

“We will,” said Agatha, setting her lips together, and sitting down firmly to listen. She was in her right senses now.

“I wish you would make haste and tell

me;" she added, as he paused, seemingly surprised by the change in her, "You don't know how quiet I am now, and how much I can bear—only tell me."

Marmaduke began, speaking in fragments hurriedly put together, looking steadily down on his hands, using a brief business-like tone—just as if every syllable had not been planned by him on his way back, so that the tidings might fall most gradually on the poor wife's ear.

"It was indeed the *Ardente*. Four sailors were picked up yesterday, in one of her boats. They say it's likely that others may have got off in the same way."

"Ah!" That wild sob of thanksgiving! Marmaduke seemed to dread it more than despair. He hastily added:

"But they had many things against them. The fire happened at midnight. When it broke out there was no one on deck but one passenger, walking up and down. He was

a young man, the sailors say, very tall, with long light hair."

The speaker's voice faltered ; he could not bear to see the misery he inflicted. At last Agatha motioned to hear more.

"One sailor remembers him particularly, because during all the tumult he was almost the only person who seemed to have his wits about him. He was seen everywhere—getting out the boats, quieting the passengers—doing it all, the man says, as steadily as if he had been in his own house on shore, instead of in a burning ship. If there was any one likely to have saved his own life and the lives of others, the sailors think it must be that young man."

"When did they see him last?"

"Not five minutes before the ship went down. He was in a boat with several more. They think it was he because of his light hair. He was leaning over towards a floating spar, helping in a woman and child."

“Ah, then it was he ! It was my husband !” cried Agatha, clasping her hands, while her countenance glowed like that of some Roman wife, who, dearer even than his life, esteemed her husband's honour.

“I believe,” she said, as that rapture faded, and the natural pang returned—“I firmly believe that he has been saved. God would not let him perish. He must have got safe off from the wreck in that boat. Don't you think he has ?”

Duke could not meet those eager eyes; he fidgeted in his seat, looked down once more on his hands, and told them over, finger by finger. At last he said, with that peculiar upward look which, amidst all his eccentricities, showed the beautiful serenity of a righteous man—a man who “walked with God :”

“Child, we can none of us be certain either way. We can only do all that lies in human power, and leave the event in the hand of

ONE who is wiser and more loving than us all."

Agatha bowed her head, and her heart with it, almost to the dust. She remembered Anne Valery's saying — how much those who love have need to trust in God. Poor Anne! Never until this minute had any one thought of Anne at home at Thornhurst. Shocked at the selfishness that often comes with great misery, Agatha cried eagerly:

"Did you hear anything about Uncle Brian?"

"No—nothing." The quick, husky tone, as Marmaduke turned and walked away, betrayed how keenly the good man suffered, though he never spoke of any sufferings but Agatha's. She was deeply touched.

"Take hope," she said earnestly. "He, too, will be saved. My husband would never forsake Uncle Brian."

“ I know that ; but then Nathanael is young, and has something to live for, while Brian is getting on in years—older than I am.—I should like to have seen him again, and have shown him little Brian ; but—— Well, it’s a strange world ! Heaven’s mercy is sure to give us a life to come, perhaps many lives—if only to make clear the hard mysteries of this. I should like to have talked that matter over with poor Brian.”

And Duke seemed wandering once more into his mild, dreamy philosophies, till Agatha recalled him.

“ Now, what is to be done ? You said, if we heard nothing, the boats must be drifting about somewhere in the Channel”—she shivered—“ and then we would take a little steamer, and go and look for them ? ”

“ I know. She’s getting ready.”

“ That is right. Then we will go on board at once,” said Agatha, with decision. She, who a week ago would have been ter-

rified at the bare thought of setting her foot on the deck of any vessel !

“ Poor little delicate thing,” muttered Duke, watching her. “ It will be a rough sea to-night, and we may be a day or two in getting round the coast. You had better go home, Agatha.”

She shook her head.

“ Somebody once told me you had never been at sea in your life ; and in winter-time this Hants and Dorset coast is rough always, sometimes dangerous.”

“ Dangerous ! and he is there !” She began tying on her bonnet, hastily, but steadily, as steadily as if preparing for a pleasant walk. “ Now, I am quite ready. Let us start.”

Her brother made no more objections, but took her through the busy Southampton streets. Once, on the quay, two lounging sailors touched their hats to Mr. Dugdale, and Agatha heard a whisper of “ Belongs

to some o' the poor fellows as went down in the *Ardente*." She shuddered, as if there were already upon her the awful sign of widowhood.

— The wide Southampton harbour, with the crafts of all nations gliding to and fro upon it—the bustle of the landing and embarking-place—the hurrying crowd, eager after their own business, none thinking of the one little vessel suddenly whelmed in that wondrous sea-highway, ever thronged, yet ever lonely,—or of the wrecked crew drifting hither and thither, no one knew where. The tale had been a day's talk, a day's pity—then forgotten.

Agatha stood in the midst of all, but saw nothing. Nothing, except the grey, bleak, merciless sea, howling and dancing to her feet like a victorious enemy, or sweeping off into the silence of the wintry horizon, there grimly folding up its mystery, as if to say, "Of me thou shalt know nothing." But

Agatha felt a fierce daring, as if, to win that secret, she was ready to pierce into nethermost hell.

“Quick, let us go,” she said, and almost bounded into the little vessel. She stood on the deck, trembling with excitement, watching the paddles crash into obedience the cruel waves, and ride over them, on—on—to the mouth of the bay. And now for the first time she was out on the open sea.

It was one of those gloomy winter days when the whole ocean looks sullen—heavy with brooding storms. No blue foamy sweeps, no lovely sea-green calms; nothing but leaden-coloured hills of water, swelling and sinking, with black valleys between. Agatha remembered a story she had read or heard in her childish days, of some wrecked sailor lad, doomed to death by his mates because the boat was too full for safety, who asked leave to sit on the gunwale until after the curl of the wave, and

then quietly dropped off into the smooth hollow below.

It was horrible! She could not look at the sea—it made her mad. She could only look skywards, and try to find a break in the dun clouds; or else over to the horizon, to see something—ever so faint and small a something—breaking the line of water and sky.

The men on board apparently knew Mr. Dugdale, and he them. They worked with a respectful solemnity, as if aware of their sad errand. The boat was a little steam-tug, and she cut her way over the heavy seas like a bird. Two men, and Marmaduke, kept watch constantly with the glass, shorewards and seawards. Sometimes they went so far out that the hazy coast-line almost vanished, and then again they ran in-shore under the gigantic cliffs that lock the south-of-England coast.

Hour after hour, the poor wife remained

on deck, sometimes walking about restlessly, sometimes lying wrapped in sails and rugs, her face turned seaward in a dumb hopelessness that was more piteous than any moans. The seamen, if they happened to come near, looked at her with a sort of awe, mingled with that compassionate gentleness which sailors almost always show towards women. More than once, great rough hands brought her carefully-prepared food, or put to use half a dozen clever nautical contrivances for the sheltering of "the poor lady."

Late at night she went down below ; by daybreak she was on deck again. She found Mr. Dugdale in his old place by the compass and the telescope. He had slept by snatches where he sat, never giving up his watch for a single hour.

"E—h!" he said, when she came and touched him. "I was dreaming of the Missus and the little ones at home."

“Do you want to go home?”

“No—no!—not while there's a hope. Keep heart, my child!”

But they looked at each other's faces in the dawn, and saw how pale and disconsolate both were. And still the little lonely boat kept rocking over the sea—the pitiless sea, that returned neither answer nor sign.

Another day—another night: just the same. Once or twice they came on the track of some vessel outward or homeward-bound, and told their story; shouting it out, in brief business-like words—how horrible they sounded! And the ship's people would be seen to come to her side, stand a while looking at the melancholy little steamer on its hopeless search—then pass on. All the world seemed passing on slowly, slowly—leaving them to that blank sea and sky, and to their own despair.

On the evening of the third day, Marmaduke, who had kept aloof for several hours,

came and stood by his sister-in-law. She was leaning at the stern, looking shorewards at two columns of rock, which the watery wear of ages had parted from the cliffs, leaving them set upright in the sea a little distance from one another, with the breakers boiling between.

“There’s ‘Old Harry and his wife,’ as the Dorset people call them. We are near home now, Agatha.”

“Home!” She gasped the word in an agony, and turned her face again seawards—towards the grey desolate line where the Channel melted away.

“The steamer can’t run on much longer without putting in-shore,” said Duke, after an interval.

Agatha almost shrieked—“You are not going on shore? We have been out such a little—little while! And you said yourself the boats would live a long time in the open Channel.”

“ But that was three days ago.”

“ Three days—oh, Heaven !—three days.”

And the black, black cloud fell over her ; —the near vision of an existence wherein *he* was not—the going home a widow—or worse, because she could never have the certainty of widowhood. To be incessantly watching by day, and starting up at night with the thought that he was come ! Never to know when, where, or in what manner he died ; to have no last blessing—no last kiss ! At the moment, Agatha would have given her whole future life—nay, her immortal soul—to cling for one minute round her husband’s neck and tell him how she loved him—with the one perfect love which nothing now could ever alter, weaken, or estrange.

Mr. Dugdale moved aside. He knew that for this burst of anguish there was no consolation. After a time, he came and said those few soothing words which are all that people can say, without being those “ miserable comforters” who only torture the more.

Even then, in that last moment of anguish, there was power in the good and soothing influence so peculiar to Marmaduke Dugdale. Agatha grew calmer—at least more passive. Soon, she saw that the little steamer's head was turned to the shore. A convulsion passed over her, but she did not rebel.

“There is a faint hope even yet,” said Duke, with a melancholy voice that almost gave the lie to his words. “They may have drifted safe ashore—though it would be almost a miracle. Or they may have been carried far out to sea, and been picked up by some outward-bound ship. It's just a chance—but——”

Agatha understood that “but.” Nothing but strong conviction would have forced it from her brother-in-law's lips. Her last hope died.

An hour or two more they spent in gliding up the narrow channel of that salt-water swamp, which at high tide appeared so glittering from the Thornhurst road. When

approached, it was a muddy chaos, desolate as an uninhabited world.

They went as far up-stream as the little steamer could run, and then landed on the bank which abutted on some rushy meadows. It was a dark winter's night—there was not a soul abroad, though some faint light showed they were near the town. The bells of Kingcombe Church were ringing merrily through the mist.

“I had quite forgotten,” muttered Duke to himself. “This must be Christmas-eve.”

What a Christmas-eve!

He half led, half lifted Agatha through the wet fields and along the road.

“You will go to my house, and let the Missus and me take care of you, my child?”

“No, no; I will go home!”

So, without any further argument, he took her to her own gate.

There it was, the familiar gate, with its shiny evergreens glittering in the lamp-light;

beyond it, the dusky line of Kingcombe-street. The cottage within was all dark, except for the faintest ray creeping under the hall-door. Marmaduke opened it, and called Dorcas. She came, and when she saw them, rushed forward sobbing.

“Oh, missus, missus—is it my missus?”

It was indeed the sorrowful mistress, who stood like a spectre in her desolate home. But Dorcas dragged her in, and opened the parlour-door.

There was an odour of warmth—a bright light, which so dazzled Agatha that at first she saw nothing. Then she saw some one lying on the sofa. And lo! there—safely there, half-buried in white pillows, haggard and death-like, yet alive—was a face she knew—a calm, sleeping face—falling round it the long light hair.

CHAPTER X.

It was Christmas morning. All the good people of Kingcombe were going to church. One only household did not go to church—there was hardly need, when all their life henceforward would be one long grateful psalm.

Agatha came down, much as she had done on her first Sunday morning in the same house, and made breakfast in the little parlour. There was a strange hush about her—a joy too solemn for outward expression. When she had finished all her preparations, she stood by the window, looking on the sunny little garden, and listening to

the Christmas-bells. The tears sprang faster—faster—her lips moved. What she was uttering no ear heard—save One. Whatever the good people of Kingcombe thought, He—to whom the whole earth is a temple, and all time a long Sabbath of praise—would forgive her that she did not go to church that day.

She heard a foot on the stairs, and ran thither like lightning.

Nathanael appeared. He was extremely feeble—every motion seemed to give him pain;—and his whole appearance was that of one rescued from the very jaws of the grave. But he looked so happy—so infinitely happy !

Agatha half-scolded him. “Why did you not call me? Why not let me help you to walk? I can do it, I know.” And creeping under his arm, she tried to convert her little self into a marvellously strong support.

Her husband only smiled, allowing himself

to be led to the sofa, laid down, and made comfortable with countless pillows. Then she stood and looked at him.

“Are you content?”

“Quite content,” he murmured. “So content, that I want nothing in this wide world.”

And by his look his wife knew that this was true.

“Agatha, darling, you have been crying? Come and sit here.”

She came—making a minute's pretence of smiles, and then fell on his neck, weeping.

“Oh! I don't deserve to be so happy—so very happy!”

“Child,” he answered, with a grave tenderness, “if we went by desert, who among us would deserve anything? Should I, who was so hard and cold towards my poor little wife, when, if I had said one word out of my real heart, and not kept it down so proudly—— Ah! I was very wicked. I, too, did not deserve that God should save me from

death, and bring me home to my dear wife's love. Darling ! don't let us talk of deserving ; only let us try to be good, and always, always love one another."

Oh, the heavenly silence of that embrace,—the life of life that was in it ! Now, for the first time the bond of full and perfect love was drawn round the husband and wife, sacredly shutting them in from the world without, which never more could come between them, or intermeddle with their sorrows or their joys.

At length Agatha gently freed herself from his clasp, saying, after her old habit of hiding emotion under a jest, something about the impossibility that the mistress of a household could idle away her time in this way. She made her husband's breakfast, and insisted on watching him finish it.

Drinking, he said with a shudder, "Oh, Agatha, you don't know what it is to be thirsty ! The hunger was nothing to it."

“Don’t talk of that, don’t,” murmured she, turning pale.

“I will not, dear.—But was it not strange that the ship which picked us up should land us at Weymouth?”

“Very strange.”

“Has anybody been over the way this morning, to see after Uncle Brian?”

“Not yet; but Harrie will take care of him. He is not near so much hurt as you; and I must look after my own husband first.” And once again she threw her arms round his neck, murmuring, “My own—my own!”

The church bells ceased, the breakfast was removed, and the husband and wife sat together.

“Somebody,” said Nathanael, suddenly—“somebody ought to go and see Anne Valery this Christmas-day.”

“Does she know?”

“She knew last night. Marmaduke said he should ride over and tell her.”

“What news for her to hear—dear, dear Anne!”

And they fell into a silence.

Agatha said at last, “When am I to see Uncle Brian?”

“Very soon, dear. Yet—stay—is not that some one at the door?”

It certainly was. People walked into one another's houses so very unceremoniously at Kingcombe. This visitor, however, paused in the hall, and then opened the parlour-door.

He was a remarkably tall man, with grey hair, and features not unlike Nathanael's, being regular and delicate. But their expression was much harsher, and indicative of a strong will and a settled bitterness, which only passed away when he smiled. This smile was very beautiful, and seemed to steal from his worn and hard-lined aspect at least ten years. Agatha knew who he was immediately.

“Uncle Brian!” Nathanael sprang up, despite his weakness, and they grasped one

another's hands as heartily as if they had not met for years.

“Is this your wife?”

“It is indeed; my own dear wife.”

“God bless her.” Mr. Locke Harper took Agatha by the hand, and looked at her keenly. The peculiar expression either of bitterness or melancholy came over his face, but as he watched her it gradually faded off. There seemed an enchantment in the young wife's sweet looks.

“You two are very happy?”

They exchanged a glance, which needed no words of confirmation; but Agatha said, with a shy blush, and a womanly grace that made her sweeter-looking than ever:

“We are all the happier now Uncle Brian has come home.”

“Thank you, my dear. Thank your husband too, for me. I would have been lying ‘full fathom five’ in the Channel now, if it were not for that boy.”

“That boy” sounded oddly enough, save for the world of tenderness in the phrase and the look which accompanied it. Any one could see at once the strong attachment subsisting between the uncle and nephew. No more was betrayed, however, and they soon began a conversation as natural and unconcerned as if they had gone through no peril, and suffered no emotion. Certainly, however strong their feelings, the Harpers were not a “sentimental” family.

Agatha thought, as like a dutiful wife she sat still and listened, that she had never seen any man—saving her husband of course—whose mien was so simple yet so truly noble, as Brian Locke Harper’s. She watched him with a pathetic curiosity, thinking what he must have been as a young man, with many other thoughts besides, which came from the very depths of her woman’s heart.

Uncle Brian talked, though in a rather fragmentary and brief fashion, of King-

combe, and of the changes he found. He never by any chance mentioned any other place than Kingcombe, until Nathanael happened to ask him where Duke was this morning?

“He has ridden out.”

“But I wanted to see him, and thank him for being so kind to my poor little wife. Where has he gone?”

“To —— Thornhurst.” The word came out sharp, low, yet with a certain tone that made it unlike other words. After saying it, Uncle Brian sat moodily looking at the fire from under his eyebrows, until Agatha, with womanly wisdom, broke the silence by speaking to her husband.

“I think, some time this afternoon, I ought to go and see Anne Valery.”

“You shall go, dear.”

Uncle Brian observed, never moving his eyes from the fire, “Harriet said that she—Miss Valery—was not quite strong this winter. Is that true?”

Agatha answered, "That it was only too true."

Something in her manner seemed to startle Mr. Locke Harper; he threw towards her one of his flashing, penetrating looks.

"We have indeed been very anxious about poor Anne," she answered. "But winter is a trying season, and we hope, in the spring——"

"Yes, in the spring," repeated Uncle Brian, hastily.—"What a gay garden you have for Christmas!" He opened the glass-door, and immediately went out. They saw him walking about, backwards and forwards, among chrysanthemum-beds and arbutus-trees, pacing hurriedly, and with a bent-down, abstracted gaze, which beheld nothing.

"Does he know about her?" said Agatha to her husband. "You said you would tell him."

"I could not, his mood was too bitter. And there are some things in which not

even I dare break upon the reserve of Uncle Brian. He is as secret and as proud—as I am.”

“ Ah, but——”

“ I understand that ‘ but,’ my child. I know how much both he and I have often erred.”

His wife pressed his hand fondly, to indicate how love had sealed its kiss of silence upon all things. Nathanael smiled, and continued :

“ I found Uncle Brian in such a strange mood at Havre. I dared not speak of anything just then, but thought the fit time would be when we came near the Dorset coast, and his heart was softened at the sight of home. I was walking on deck, pondering how to tell him, when——”

“ Ah, I know.” And Agatha forgot every thing—it was natural she should—in rejoicing once more over the beloved saved.

Suddenly, there was heard a fluttering, and a chattering with Dorcas in the hall, marking

an unmistakeable approach—Mrs. Dugdale with her young flock.

Harrie was in the best of spirits and heartiest of moods, though that may be an unnecessary superlative regarding a lady who had never been seen either moody or out of spirits since her cradle. She embraced Agatha warmly, and even went through the same ceremony with her brother Nathanael, which he bore with exemplary fortitude, but shook his hair after it, like a dog who has been coaxed and petted against his will. However, he kissed his little nephews good-humouredly, let Brian sit astride on his sofa-pillows, benignly assured Fred's inquiring mind that Uncle Nathanael had not been to the bottom of the sea and up again—and answered Gus with a more serious voice, that it was not exactly "funny" to be drowned.

"Funny? No, indeed," exclaimed the mother. "I am sure the shock was dreadful to us all. I don't know when *I* shall get over it. And that reminds me that Duke thinks

it had been too much for poor Anne. She is worse,—keeping her bed. I think, as she is so fond of your wife, if Agatha could go—Oh, there you are, Uncle Brian! Duke sent a message to you. He says, he is afraid it will be some days before you can see your old friend Anne: she is very ill indeed.”

Brian stood silent, resting his hand on the glass-door. The colourless, stony face, void of any expression, excepting the eyes, and they——Never while she lived did Agatha forget the look of those eyes! She whispered, in passing him by:

“I am going to her now—I shall send word soon;” and left the room.

There was a slight difficulty about her being driven to Thornhurst, as she insisted on her husband's keeping quiet at home. Harrie made a dozen plans and counter-plans, until they were all frustrated by Brian Harper's rising from the corner where he had sat motionless:

"If you will allow me, I will drive you there."

"Thank you." There was no more said about it: they started.

Mr. Harper scarcely spoke to his niece all the way, until just as they were passing the gate where, on that awful walk, Agatha had startled Mrs. Dugdale.

"I hear you came all these miles on foot, in the middle of the night. It was a very brave thing for a woman to do. I did not think any woman could have love enough in her to do it."

"I know several who would."

"Who are they?"

"Harrie Dugdale, probably; and for certain, Anne Valery."

Brian said no more until they reached the gates of Thornhurst. There he helped her to descend, reins in hand, and waited. Just as Agatha was going he touched her arm:

"Ask how she is, will you?"

Agatha sent the message, and remained with him for a minute or two. He stood motionless by the horse, his hat pulled down over his brows—nothing visible but the sharp profile of his mouth. Old Andrews called him “that gentleman”—eyed him with some curiosity, then bowed, and wished him a “merry Christmas,” country fashion.

The answer about the Mistress of Thornhurst was brief; she was “much the same;” the servants did not seem to apprehend any danger.

Brian shook his niece's hand. “I shall go back across the moors to Kingcombe. Tell her, if at any time she would like to see an old friend——”

He stopped, threw down Dunce's reins, and started off towards the high ground, striding over heather and furze, with his free backwoods-man's step.

Andrews looked after him. “If that be any man alive—it be Mr. Locke Harper! O Lord! and I didn't know 'un—my dear old

master ! Mr. Harper ! Mr. Locke Harper ! Do'ee hear, sir !” He ran a little way in vain pursuit of the retreating figure ; then Agatha saw him sit down on a stone, hide his face in his shaking old hands, and cry for joy.

While, far over the hill-side, in very sight of the closed blinds of Anne's room, the returned wanderer strode away, and disappeared.

It was some time before Agatha could summon courage to walk up-stairs. All things seemed so strange. She could hardly realise the fact that she had been driven from Kingcombe by Uncle Brian's own self, and that she was now going to tell Anne Valery that he was here.

At last, calmed by faith in heaven, and in that next holiest faith, love, she opened the door of Anne's bedroom.

It was silent, solemn, and peaceful. There was a prayer-book by the bedside, open at one of the Christmas-day psalms. No one lingered in the room, or about the couch, with sisterly

or friendly care ; all was serene and lonely, as Anne's whole life had been. At the opening of the door, a faint voice asked, " Who is there ?"

" Only I ! Oh, Anne, dearest Anne !"

There was a pause of weeping silence, though one only wept. Miss Valery soothed the girl in all sorts of tender ways.

" You have suffered much, my poor child, but it is over now. Forget it. You will be very happy now."

" And you too—you too, Anne ! But why do you lie here so drearily, with no one near you ?"

" I like it."

" But you will rise soon ? You *must* get well now they are come home. You little think how anxious all are about you."

" That is kind. Everybody was always very kind to me."

After a few moments, during which Anne lay with her eyes shut, and Agatha watched,

with an unaccountable dread, the wonderful, spiritual calm of her features, she suddenly said :

“ You have seen him, have you not ? ”

“ Uncle Brian ? Yes.”

“ How does he look ? Was he harmed by that—that awful time on the sea ? ”

“ No ; he seems quite well. He drove me to Thornhurst.”

“ Then he is here ? ” And there came a slight trembling over the placid face.

“ He had to go back to Kingcombe, I believe,” said Agatha, hesitating. “ But he told me to say, if you liked to see an old friend—He does not know how ill you have been,” she added, with irrepressible vexation, “ or else I should have felt very, very angry, even with Uncle Brian.”

“ Hush ! You do not understand him yet,” said Anne, gently, as she once more closed her eyes. Many thoughts seemed to sweep over her, but none left a trace of

bitterness behind. She was past all restlessness or suffering now.

“How are you all going to keep Christmas, Agatha? You ought to be very happy. After such a week as this has been, everything seems happiness now.”

“Not everything—when you are not with us, Anne—I mean, not with us to-day.”

“But I shall be with you, to-day and every day. Nothing can keep one's spirit from those one loves. I shall never be far away from Thornhurst and Kingcombe, and Kingcombe Holm.”

She said this more to herself than to Agatha, who listened, her throat choking; then answered abruptly, “You are talking too much—you must be quiet.”

Anne smiled—one of her old smiles, so full of cheerfulness. “I think I am quiet enough already, but I will obey.”

She turned her face to the pillow, and lay for a long time without moving. At length she said:

“Agatha, I want you to do something for me.”

“What is it?”

“I would like to see your husband, and my old friend, Mr. Brian Harper. Will you go and fetch them?”

“I will, to-morrow, but——”

“No, dear, not to-morrow; I must see them to-day—this very Christmas-day. Go—you will not be away long. And we will send the easy carriage, so that the journey can do Nathanael no harm.”

“You are always thinking of every one,” said Agatha, as she turned to obey. She felt it was a solemn mission. All her bright plans about Thornhurst grew dim; she could not look forward. Yet, warm in the strength of youth and love, she cherished a faint hope still.

When she reached Kingcombe, Brian had not come home. They sent messengers for him in all directions, but in vain. At last they were forced to drive back without him

—hopelessly peering through the dusk to see if they could discern his tall figure across the moors. When they were dashing at full speed through Thornhurst-gate, some one rose up from the hedge beside it, and stopped the horses.

“Is anything the matter at the house? Speak—can’t you, fellow?”

The voice, hoarse and commanding—the tall, spare figure, the grey hair flying abroad—it could be none other than Brian Harper.

Nathanael called to him. “Uncle Brian, we have been looking for you everywhere. Anne wants to see you. Come.”

“I will.” He walked away and was lost in the furze-bushes; but when the carriage drove up to the door they found him already standing there. They all entered the house together.

Anne’s maid met them with a delighted countenance. Her mistress was so well—

thank God ! She was up, and sitting in the drawing-room !

There in truth she was, in her usual seat, wearing her ordinary dress. She had taken off the invalid-cap, and her soft hair was arranged as carefully as if no white lines marred its brownness. She looked less old than usual—nay, almost beautiful—so exquisitely peaceful was the expression of her countenance.

Nathanael and his wife hung back, letting Mr. Harper meet her first.

She rose and held out both her hands to him. “ Welcome home again — welcome home ! ”

He said nothing, but grasped the hands, and retained them fast. There was a long, long look, eye to eye, and face to face,—a look, in which were gathered and summed up all the years since they were young together,—and then the two old friends sat down side by side. Agatha thought it strange that they

should meet in such a calm, common-place way—but then she was young. She did not know how quietly flows the outward surface of a tide that has flowed on, deep, solemn, and changeless, for five-and-twenty years.

In a little while they were all sitting round the fire—the merry Christmas fire with its blazing pine-log—talking just as naturally and familiarly as though no emotion had stirred them. Anne Valery, resting in her arm-chair, looked on and smiled. She talked little, but listened to the rest, and by an inexplicable sweet calmness made them all so much at ease, that it seemed to Agatha as if they four had known one another for a whole lifetime, and been always as happy as now.

As the evening advanced, the Christmas dinner was announced.

“I am sorry I cannot sit at the head of my own table now, but”—and Miss Valery gently laid her hand on Brian's arm—“you will take my place, old friend?”

He made some unintelligible answer, and they all left the drawing-room. It was a rather silent dinner; yet, somehow, no one looked sad. No one could, with Anne's cheerful influence pervading the whole house.

Agatha soon rose and rejoined her. She was sitting just as they had left her—but whether it was through the light being dimmer, or through a certain thoughtfulness in her face, Agatha thought she did not look quite the same.

“Are you well? Are you sure you are not tired? And”—here Agatha ventured to wrap her arms round her and gaze up in her eyes with a fulness of meaning—“are you happy?”

“Ay, happy! Perfectly happy!” The look and tone were such as Agatha never forgot. They expressed a bliss that of its intensity could not necessarily endure for more than the briefest time in this changing world. It belonged to the world everlasting.

“ Will you go back, dear, and ask Brian to come to me? I would like to talk a little, alone, with my old friend.”

Agatha obeyed.—When she had delivered her message, Mr. Harper rose without speaking. She saw him go into the drawing-room and close the door; then she came back to her husband.

For more than two hours Agatha and Nathanael sat, not liking to go in without being summoned. At last they ventured to pass the door. The silence within was so death-like that it half frightened them.

“ I wish she would call,” Agatha whispered. “ She looked so strangely white when she spoke to me. Hush! is not that some one stirring? I must knock.”

She did so, but there was no answer. At last, trembling all over, she caught hold of her husband's hand and made him enter.

The room was quite still, and nearly in darkness, for the lamp had been suffered to burn itself almost out. Anne sat in her

arm-chair, with Brian kneeling beside her, his arms clasping her waist, and hers linked behind his neck. Neither moved, or seemed to notice anything ; and the two young people, greatly moved by the scene, were gliding away, when a sudden glimmer of the fire showed them Anne Valery's face. They saw it—grasped one another's hands with an awe-struck meaning—and stayed.

In a minute or two Anne faintly spoke.

“ I think there is some one here ? Is it Agatha ? ”

The young girl flung herself on Anne's other hand.—“ It is I—and my husband. May we stay ? We too loved you, dear, dear Anne ? ”

“ I know that ! One minute, just one minute, Brian.”

She loosed her clasp of him a little ; the other two came near, she kissed them both, and bade “ God bless them.” Then raising herself up and speaking with all her strength, she said :

“ You will bear witness, and say to them all, that if I had married, none but Brian Locke Harper would ever have been my husband : therefore I have left to him Thornhurst, and all I have in the world, in token of my love and reverence—just as if—I had been—his wife.”

With the last words, uttered very feebly, Anne sank into her old attitude, lying back with both her arms round his neck. She lay there many minutes, her face beautiful in its perfect rest. The other face—his face—was altogether hidden. But they saw that as he clasped her tightly round, every muscle was quivering. The convulsion grew so strong that even Anne felt it. She opened her eyes, and tried to comfort him.

“ Brian, poor Brian !—Be content ; it is but for a little while—such a little while !”

Her fingers began to flutter feebly on his neck. She ringed the grey locks round them in a childish, absent way, muttering to herself,

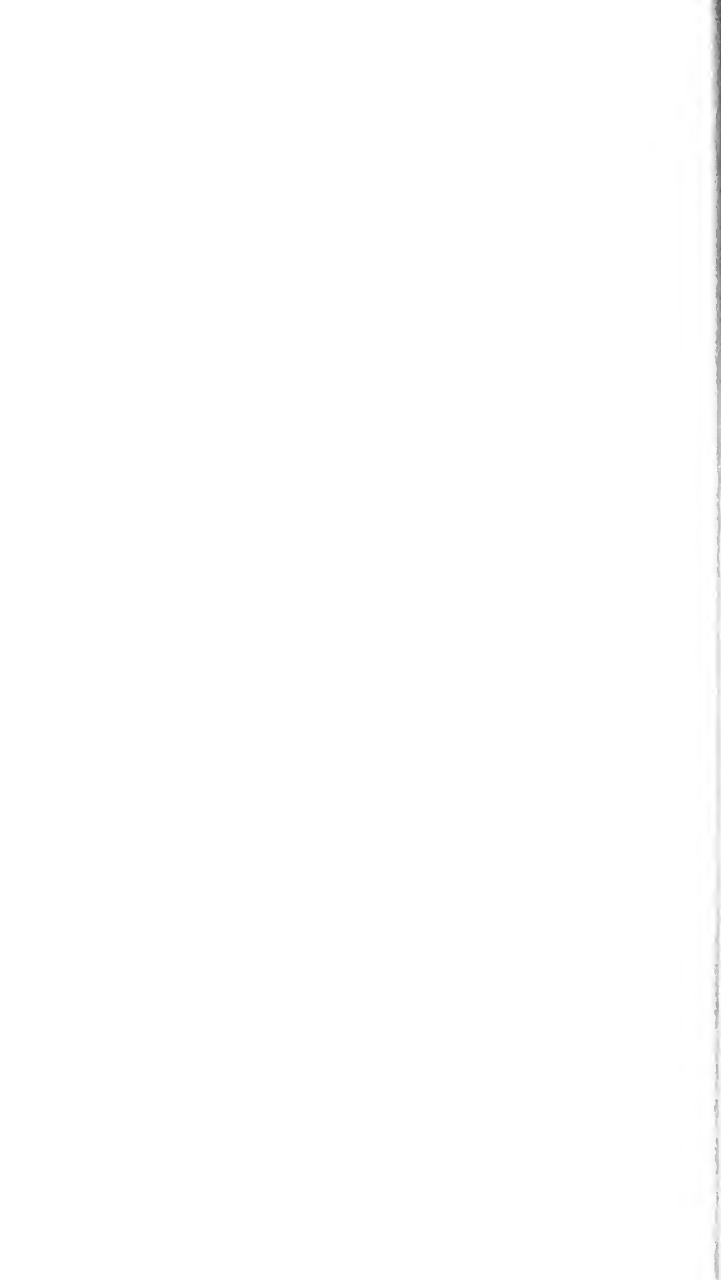
“How very soft it is still ! He used to have such beautiful hair !”

Then, as if she felt her mind wandering, and strove to bring it back, that to the very last moment it might rest on him, she again forcibly opened her eyes and fixed them on Brian's face. They never left it afterwards. The whole world seemed to have faded from her except that face. For a minute or two longer she lay looking at him, her countenance all radiant, until, gradually and softly, her eyes closed.

“Hush !” whispered Nathanael, as he drew his weeping wife closer to his bosom, and pointed out the beatitude of that dying smile. “Hush—she is quite happy. She has *gone home !*”

THE END.





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